The 1300 Days

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The 1300 Days

by stele3

Summary

Pre-series. Sam was at college for almost 4 years... 1300 days, to be exact. This is what happened to Dean during that time.

Notes

Beta-read by witchofthedogs (I think? It was a while ago.)

- Translation into Español available: LOS 1300 DIAS (The 1300 Days) by lostintranslation (enteselene)

Chapter 1: The First Day: Lessons in Geometry

Prologue

It hadn't been four years, actually. Somewhere in the darkness of an Arizona back road, Sam piped up with a revelation: between that April day when he'd left them in the baking heat of the South Dakota Badlands, and the Halloween night when Dean had shown up unannounced at his door (*through* his door, actually), there had been exactly 1300 turns of the Earth.

Dean grunted, and thanked every benevolent spirit he knew that the darkness of night hid his face.

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The First Day: Lessons in Geometry

"Shit," Dean announced calmly as he surveyed the expanse of white and gray desert hills before him, squinting in the ruthlessly hot sun.

"Yeah, you could say that," his father chuckled beside him, and took a swig from his whiskey bottle.

"Shit," Dean obliged, and took the bottle from him.

"You guys shouldn't drink out here; it'll only dehydrate you," Sam put in sharply.

Dean eyed the half-inch of remaining amber liquid then raised it in toast to the godforsaken view. "Here's to a quicker death. Take me soon, oh ye desert sands." He tossed it back swiftly, observing his father's movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Hey, hey, now!" John Winchester bellowed, and swiped lightly at Dean's shoulder. Dean ducked his head and clenched his teeth, shuddering as the alcohol scalded him from esophagus to belly. Then he painted on a shit-eating grin and straightened, throwing the empty bottle down the hill.

"Godammit, Dean, that was our last fifth!" John protested, cuffing his

oldest son over his head. This was becoming a more difficult task, as Dean now stood level to his father's shoulder, something he had inwardly noted and never, never mentioned. Dean danced lightly away, falling naturally into a fighting stance. John followed, grinning, and jabbed with loose, open hands.

Amid the scuffling of their feet, Sam muttered quietly, "*Your* last fifth, you mean."

If John heard this muttered aside, he gave no sign. Ducking Dean's hook, he jogged backwards and dropped his hands. "Alright, boys, enough fucking around. We've got ourselves an Iya to track down."

A roll of the shoulders, a set of the back and jaw, and all the playfulness slithered from their father's body, leaving hard, resolute lines. Dean lowered his hands slowly, watching, and knew without looking that Sam did likewise. A hundred times… and now a hundred and one times, they had watched their father disappear, waver away like a mirage, and leave behind only a soldier who trudged past and expected them to follow.

"Hey, gimme a minute," Dean called as his father popped the Impala's trunk and Sam slid into the back seat, "gotta go see a man about a demonically-possessed horse."

"Make it quick." John drew a crossbow out and began fitting it. Dean paused a moment, glancing into the car at Sam. His thin teenage frame was a mere shadow through the dark car windows. Dean frowned; Sam should be helping Dad prep weaponry. He glanced quickly at his father in time to catch the flash of eyes behind sunglasses, reading and understanding the slight. An arrow clicked into place a little too loudly.

Make it quick. They're gonna be at each other soon.

-o-

Dean jogged slantwise down the steep hill, further than simple modesty dictated. Once out of earshot as well as vision, he doubled over and stuck a finger down his throat, heaving and gagging. The whiskey came up instantly, warm and acidic. Dean spat, heaved, and spat again, swiping at his mouth. Straightening, he leaned against the blazing hot rock, hissing as his skin protested against the sun-baked surface.

His stomach turned over, and he'd pay for this bit of pseudo-bulimia.

Dean frowned at that, and mentally weighed the effect an upset digestive system might have on his hunting skills. Iyas were by no means the nastiest creatures they'd ever handled, but Dad had actually swallowed his share of Jack, and whatever other bits of alcohol in his baggage Dean had failed to slip away. And Sam…

Dean paused his mental calculations, then sighed and crouched low to the ground, picking at his frayed jeans. Sam would think that Dean had downed his portion, too, and tonight they would fight. They were already fighting silently, in Sam's passive-aggressive way. Dean snorted to himself, scuffing at the dirt with the worn toe of his sneakers. Rage he could handle; violence, he understood. His father had hit him once, hard, struck him full across the face and knocked him flat onto the wet Tennessee pavement. Dean had staggered back to the motel from crashing a New Year's Eve party, his 15-year-old body newly devoid of virginity and blooming with Ecstasy. Then he'd slid through the door, smelled the medical antiseptic, and *known*. Sammy had lain propped up on his bed, bandaged and sleeping. Dean had stood over him, peering through the swimming torpor of drugs at the sizable bruises along his little brother's neck. He'd understood the bruises, and their cause within himself. He'd understood it, too, when his father stood up quietly from a shadowed chair in the corner, took him by the shoulder to the rainy parking lot, and struck him with every inch of his weight. Dad was a hell of a hunter, even drunk; that night he'd been stone-cold sober.

Lying there huddled on the ground, his eyes rolling around like slot machines, Dean had understood it with the kind of clarity that stripped away drugs, flesh, and innards to leave only the naked mind. They never spoke of it: his father helped him up wordlessly, took him back inside, and handed him an ice pack. There had been no words necessary. Dean had looked in the mirror the next morning and saw his brother's wounds echoed in his own flesh. It had been a monster, but one of the human variety: a convicted pedophile somehow got Sammy out of the room where Dean had left him asleep and into a car before Sammy sank sharp teeth into his hand. Laying a finger against the bluish-purple skin on his cheek, Dean had pressed until he winced. Punishment for his shortcomings. Sneaking away for a night of revelry when Sammy, little chubby Sammy of the precious bones and breakable skin, needed someone to watch over him. It would not happen again. It had not happened again. Dean's teenage rebellion had lasted less than 24 hours.

A small lizard skittered across the ground in front of him, and Dean realized he was staring at dirt. He blinked, shook himself, stood, and

began trudging back up the hill. He had been stupid before, stupid and selfish, thinking of his own enjoyment when Sammy and Dad had needed him. Dean, master of truancy from all things academic, could always remember one bit of mathematics from an old bearded teacher in Oregon who had smiled at him despite the scrawled, incorrect equations. It'd been seven months, one of the longest stints at any school, long enough for Sammy to get attached and Dean to grow uncomfortable. He hated having to get to know people: such a useless task, when anyone who thought they mattered would see their reflection in the rearview mirror soon. But this one teacher had simply smiled, not asked the usual questions about Dean's bruises (from a golem, but try explaining that), and patiently explained the finer points of geometry. And surprisingly, Dean had listened. Later, Sammy laughed incredulously over the kitchen table, and Dean turned a flushing, anxious face to his father, insisting that geometry had many valid uses and could even be applied to their own family.

"We're a triangle, Dad!" He'd snatched a butter knife from Sammy's plate, fumbling with 12-year-old fingers to lay it across his own fork and knife. "See? You're the base, and Sammy and I are the sides, leaning together. Mr. Kirchoffer said it was the strongest shape, that nothing could knock it down. But if you take one away, it's just two lines together, and it won't stay up."

Dad had stared so long that Dean thought he was mad and silently handed back Sammy's knife, swallowing the rest of dinner around the lump of his embarrassment.

Dean crested the hill, leaping up the last few feet of loose earth to stand with his back to the sky. Before him, the black Impala purred happily. The stars realigned, with Dad in the front seat and Sam in the back loading shells. The shotgun seat stood empty, waiting for him.

Sometime after Childhood, Montana, passing through Teenage, Illinois, en route to Adulthood, Oklahoma, something odd had happened to their little triangle. He was the base of the triangle, now: he balanced their angers and fears and nightmares against each other. And Mom, in the center of their triangle, not a part but always present. There was the alcohol, of course, but it really had more to do with him than Dad. It was like the towns and the schools and the people: Sammy would start making friends, Dad would channel all his rage and guilt at some hapless local boogeyman that Dean almost felt sorry for. They'd get involved, emotionally and mentally. But Dean skimmed over it all, always rolling forward, a moving target. It was a gift: he was the Jedi fucking Master of avoidance and evasion. Feeling

emotionally isolated? Pick up a chick and play the old game How Much of My Story Will You Buy. Brother suffering from poor self-esteem? Drag him out hunting so he can release some aggression, and for God's sakes don't talk about it. Demon momentarily possessing your father and beating the crap out of you with his fists? Exorcise the bastard and beat his ass back to Hell, then crack a joke so the bruises on your father's knuckles won't eat him alive.

Dean was the base. He kept them together, and while they were together, they were all strong.

Underneath the blazing hot sun, with his father calling to him and a warm breeze on his back, Dean suddenly shivered.

-o-

He hadn't meant to find it, really. In the dark he'd mistaken Sam's bag for Dad's, and hadn't realized his mistake until he'd slid soundless fingers past clothes to find not the cold smoothness of a bottle but the crumpled edge of an acceptance letter to UCLA. Now he stood frozen in the flickering bathroom light, squinting through sleep and confusion at the words "exemplary," "unique," and "gifted." They formed some foreign language inside his head, a litany that he did not yet understand.

When the fuck did he apply? Date on the letter says March, Christ, one month he's been accepted. Instinct propelled Dean forward – *always keep moving* – and slid the letter back under Sam's jeans, stealthily zipping the bag up. He switched the light off and stood in darkness, waiting for his eyes to readjust. *Did he accept it? Is he going to leave? When does school start? What kinds of evil things live in Los Angeles?...besides the movie agents. How far is it from here? Fuck! How can he leave?*

Dean eased the door open and tiptoed out into the bedroom again, dropping the bag down on the floor between the beds. Then he stood over the sleeping forms of his father and his brother.Dad moved fitfully in his sleep, probably reliving some battle or inventing a new one – Dean had learned to duck when he shook the older man awake. Sam, though, lay absolutely still, breathing slow and deep and steady.

It came, unbidden and inexorable, slipping through the million dark keyholes of his mind. The memory was more of a story that he told himself than anything he could actually recall. There was fire, his mind said, and he imagined it licking at the hallway. Sammy. Dad carrying Sammy. Me carrying Sammy. "Go, Dean, go," and he went, a

tiny figure bearing a baby half his own size. Down the stairs, outside. Flames, flames in the window, and Dad wasn't there.

There, on the lawn… there had been a moment, holding Sammy and staring up at that orange window. Against his father's orders and his own instincts – always keep moving, even then – he'd paused, and turned to watch the house burn. And for just a moment, the world had constricted, pulled in around him close until it was just him and the baby in his arms, alone. Two lines together… and he'd thought for an instant of everything he'd do to keep this baby in his arms alive, of the things he'd willingly steal and the people he'd happily kill, to keep this one child alive, because this was going to be his world now, this crying thing in his arms, this was all that was left to him and he would tear himself to ribbons to keep it safe. And then Dad had swooped them both up into his arms, and the world had expanded again, and he was saved from the darkness of desperate love.

His hands were in fists. He unclenched them slowly, listening to his brother breathe.

-o-

Dean stared at the bag seated primly outside the open hotel room door. It was an innocuous little thing, so easy to mistake for a different one. He wanted to rip it to shreds.

Instead he turned, headed back to the car, and sat in the driver's seat with a cold jug of milk fresh from the convenience store in his lap. Small rivulets of water traced down the sides, dripping on his jeans. Distantly he heard shouting from the motel room.

Stupid, stupid. Stupid Dean thought he could hold them together with basic geometry. Of course Sammy wants to go away. He's "exemplary," "unique," and "gifted." He's not a freak. The bright point of his day does not revolve around discovering some new defense incantation. There's nothing for him here.

His hand holding the cold milk jug had gone numb. He laid it carefully in the passenger seat, then closed his fingers around the steering wheel, gripping it. Keep moving. If he started driving now, his mind calculated automatically, he could make it to… where? Cleveland? Memphis? Chicago? What would he do there? He'd barely finished high school, he'd never worked a steady job in his life. Hunt alone? He imagined staggering back to a hotel room, no one but his own murderous eyes in the bathroom mirror. It was human nature to

seek kinship: if he had no kin to turn to, the darkness might look more friendly, and then he'd be lost. One line on its own, so easy to push down. There's nothing for me out there. This is all there is, all I'll ever be is right here, forever.

Sam emerged from the motel door, slamming it shut behind him, and both Dean's heart and mind stopped. His little brother scooped up the duffel bag, moving with quick, angry strides out into the parking lot. Then he slowed, and stood with the duffel bag in one hand, a laundry sack in the other.

He looked at Dean through the Impala's windshield, the focused intensity of righteous anger twisting away to something that looked like it hurt. He was tall now, level with their father and growing still, filling out into broader shoulders. The childhood chubbiness had faded to long limbs, nothing like Dad's compact muscular frame. Or Dean's.

Staring back through thick glass, Dean thought, You don't look anything like us. They'll take you. You'll pass, they won't see beneath to the weirdness. Dad and I… he chose to be a freak. And me… I don't remember choosing.

But I must have. I think… I must have.

He opened his car door and stood beside it. Sam stared at him, skinny boy in an overgrown shirt with everything he owned in his two hands.

Dean spoke first, and the steadiness of his own voice amazed him.

"Need a ride?"

-o-

It was six hours and a long drive before Dean sat in the same spot again, staring through the windshield at the door to their motel room. It stood slightly ajar, and for an instant he had panicked, hand shooting for the glove compartment and the hidden weapons there. And then Dad had slouched past the narrow opening, bottle in one hand and journal in the other.

Sam was gone, traveling on a bus to California. It wasn't UCLA after all, but Stanford, and potentially law school after that. How perversely normal of him. The ride to the Greyhound station had been deathly silent, full of rigid muscles and fixed gazes on the passing scenery. Dean had almost left him in the parking lot, had actually ground out a

goodbye while Sam stood outside the window, with every intention of driving away as fast as possible. Nothing good could come of going inside and waiting with him… but then Sammy's face finally broke, shattering open, and Dean had parked in a 10-minute zone for two hours so that he could sit, still wordless, in a waiting room with his baby brother. Dean, the Jedi Master of emotional avoidance, could almost laugh about that. Two guys, full to splitting seams with a rush of words, and not a sentence came out. Truly a Winchester classic.

Sam finally spoke into the long silence. "Do you hate me?"

"No," Dean replied instantly, without thinking. But he didn't need to think. This was his brother. Of course he didn't hate him. He could feel Sam's eyes on him, and kept his own gaze trained on the same FHM magazine spread of Jessica Biel that he'd been pretending to read for about an hour.

"Dad said not to come back." Sam's voice deepened with his anger. "He said that once I left the family, that was it, I couldn't come back to it."

Dean closed the magazine sharply, glancing desperately around the waiting room. He prayed for a large-breasted woman, or an armed robbery. Hell, he'd take a poltergeist, anything to halt this particular conversation. It cut through that nice pleasant layer of casual blasé in which he wrapped himself.

And God knew, once you got under there, he might shatter into a million sniveling, helpless shards of defeated coping mechanisms. Dean knew what he was; a soldier had to recognize his own weaknesses, and know how far he could push them. He was a wire cage, held together with duct tape, and inside he hid the raised scars of his own flesh. The sleepless hours in crappy hotel rooms, arms wrapped around little Sammy's chubby frame and his fingers in his brother's hair, whispering stories that would drown out the screams of their father's nightmares next door. That night in Tennessee, when he first had understood and accepted that he would never be free of his brother's life. Those endless times that ran together, when he'd watched his father bleed or make something else bleed. It was a job, Dad had explained to him, think of it like a job. Office workers get up every morning and type up reports; ask them at the end of the year and they'd likely never recall an individual day's work.

And Dean had obeyed, deliberately letting his memories slide and merge. And they'd promptly melted into a great crushing well of

nothing, because Dad had failed to recognize one crucial thing: he had his wife's face to lay him to sleep every night, and to waken him in the morning for a fresh day's work.

Dean had only Sam. And Sam wanted out.

"Dean?"

He focused his eyes on the exit, wishing desperately that he was stronger, smarter. But it came out anyway. "Isn't that what you want?"

He turned and faced Sam finally. He owed his little brother that much. Sam watched him, his expression unreadable. Dean drew a breath into his raw throat. "College isn't just college, Sam. Especially law school. You go to law school, you wanna be a lawyer. You wanna be a lawyer, you practice it. You get a job, a house, and God knows you'll find a girl. Chicks dig lawyers, man, so kudos on a smart career choice." He gave a mock thumbs up and a wide toothy grin. "And then she'll get pregnant, and before you know it, you'll have the whole American dream. The house, the wife, the kids, all of it." He couldn't fight the bitterness anymore, and gave in. He was weak that way. "Face it, Sam. You're not just leaving for college, you're leaving for life."

Sam's eyes were dark, angry. He studied Dean's face, then asked softly, "Haven't you ever wanted a different life?"

Dean laughed. He threw his head back and laughed, because he couldn't start crying and expect to stop anytime soon. Duct tape only held together for so long.

"What different life?" Instinct took over and suddenly he was on his feet, pacing, moving back and forth. "I'm not like you, Sammy. I'm not smart. This is all I've ever done, all I'm good at. And Dad needs me here. Losing you, he'll survive. It'll be ugly, but he'll make it. But if he lost both of us, it would kill him and you know it."

Sam hugged his duffel bag to his chest, guilt and defiance and sadness warring on his angular face. Dean started to speak again, but suddenly an announcement over the loudspeakers called for the bus.

He'd followed Sam outside, and made it all the way to the bus' door before he finally grabbed his brother's shoulder and pulled him aside. Fumbling through pockets, he started dragging out every charm, every protection amulet he had on him. He murmured incantations, pressed a spare packet of rock salt that he found in his back pocket into Sam's

palm. He even prayed a little. Distantly he heard Sammy saying his name with an awful hitch in it, but he couldn't look, he couldn't look. When he reached the end of his knowledge and there was nothing more of himself he could give, he folded his arms around his little brother's narrow shoulders and squeezed him close. But only for a moment, because soon the wire cage would break, and the million shards inside might explode outward like a dirty bomb, shredding everyone to pieces. Dean understood rage. Dean understood violence, and how close he was to that empty, comforting edge of oblivion.

It was only later, after he practically ran back to the car and watched the bus pull away in the rearview mirror, after he drove two hours back with clenched teeth and blurred eyes that didn't quite spill over, that he felt the world shrink, until there was nothing left but an old man inside a grungy motel room. An old broken man who would slide in between being his father and a soldier, who was now chugging down the solitary bottle of rum that Dean had failed to confiscate. Another failure, one that he would need bruises to pay for.

Dean slid the keys out of the ignition and got out of the car. The world closed around him, tight.

And that was the end of the first day.

Chapter 2: The 253rd Day: The Winchester Echo

The 253rd Day: The Winchester Echo

The phone rang once, twice, and Dean began to hope.

“Hello?”

Fuck. Of course not, nothing’s that easy.

“Heyyy, Sammy. How you doin’, little bro?”

There was the barest pause on the other end, long enough for Dean to anticipate the click of a hang up, which was what he’d been doing all morning anyway. Then his brother’s voice said, “It’s Sam,” in a slow, even tone and Dean could imagine him standing up straight as a pole, and just as skinny.

Dean hit the flippancy switch. “What, you’ve changed your name now, too?”

Sam snorted. “Would you like to check my birth certificate?” Then, “Where are you?”

“Right behind you.”

There was another short pause, and Dean chuckled. “Made ya look.”

Sam’s laughter rang with the perfect musical harmony of irritation and amusement. Dean was a marvelous composer sometimes. “You jackass. Where are you?”

Dean paused. Words lurked behind those words. Every tribe of nomads had their oral traditions … mentally he had dubbed theirs “The Winchester Echo.” They spoke aloud and silently in the same breath, in frequencies and codes known only to them. For instance, *Where are you?* inquired not only about Dean’s whereabouts, but his proximity to their father, and, by extension, John Winchester’s knowledge of the phone call.

He answered in kind. “North Carolina, outside Statesville. There’s some phantom train down here, keeps running people over… conductor ran it off a bridge back in the teens, got decapitated on the

way down. Apparently he's a little peeved about it." He took a deep breath. "Presently, I'm at the world's shittiest pay phone in the crappiest truck stop imaginable." *Not calling from the hotel room, Dad doesn't know. He's still angry. I'm not.* "If I catch a disease or get mugged out here, it's on your head."

"If a mugger comes after you, I pity the poor guy."

Dean laughed and the coils around his stomach loosened a little. He leaned back against the glass of the telephone booth. A gust of icy wind blew hard on his neck through a crack in the folding door and outside, gray clouds promised snow, or doom. It was hard to tell sometimes.

"So, how is sunny California these days?" Dean congratulated himself on the lightness of his tone. "Bet there are chicks walking around in bikinis all over the place, huh?" he added wistfully as a bundled form hurried past.

"I dunno, I haven't really been looking. And don't give me shit!" Sam continued over Dean's groan. "You try taking 21 units of bullshit humanities classes to fulfill some general education requirements that have absolutely NOTHING to do with your field of study." *This is what I'm doing, this is where I am. I'm okay.*

Dean checked the menacingly looming clouds again. They loomed, menacingly. *Please don't be portents of doom,* he pleaded with them, *I'm low on silver crosses and I don't think Sam has any*. "Yeesh. California is wasted on college students."

"Yeah, whatever. So," Sam went on, and his voice changed, "how're you doing?"

I miss you.

Dean opened his mouth and left it there for a few moments.

"I'm fine," he said at last.

The silence around those words fell thick as black clouds.

-o-

"Shoot!"

The headless body swung upright, and blood splattered in an arc over

Dean where he lay on the ice-covered ground. He flinched as if he'd been hit with boiling water, but more out of surprise than fear.

Sprinting from the other side of the dilapidated bridge, John Winchester unfurled the full power of his body, legs pumping, arms swinging. In one hand he clutched enough rock salt to fill the Devil's mouth; in the other, a six-inch bowie knife. If the ghostly manifestation standing over his son had a head in which to rest eyes, it would have found the sight fearsome. But it did not, and John had no gun.

"Shoot, goddammit, Dean!" he thundered again.

The numb fingers of his eldest son sprang to life, scrabbling for the shotgun stock. The decapitated body of former train conductor H.K. Linster, obviously a little put out at being made temporarily corporeal after a century of haunting the locals, raised his lantern above the stump of his neck. The flame within flickered, sputtered, then exploded into a living fireball that wailed for blood.

Then the decaying flesh of the right hand holding the fireball aloft exploded and the lantern fell to the ground, shattering, its flame extinguished. Dean rolled backwards with the shotgun's recoil and came up on one knee. Linster's corpse stumbled, clutching at the mess of its limb, and Dean fired again into its leg. The ghost-made-flesh hit the ground.

John closed the distance and swooped down, plunging the thrice-blessed and silver-lined blade straight into Linster's chest. An unearthly shriek rose from the thrashing body, though not from any visible mouth. Ignoring the protest completely, John pressed the sole of a boot straight into the torso and upended his packet of rock salt.

"Lighter fluid," he snapped, but Dean was already lunging over to his bag, which he'd dropped when Linster's suddenly-animated corpse had leapt on his back. Curses slipped through his gritted teeth and from the corner of his eye he saw Linster's still-deadly left hand close around his father's ankle. Then he had the bottle of lighter fluid and John had a match and there was nothing left to do but make s'mores.

At least that's what he'd suggested in the tense aftermath, twisting cracked lips upward. His father clearly had other plans if the laser-eyed gaze he gave Dean as he passed was any indication. Dean stayed by the warm, licking flames as long as he dared, staring through them into the glittering darkness of ice and shadow. But pride and training

eventually took over and he hoisted his kit onto a bruised shoulder, then marched away for his interrogation.

They barely made it through the hotel room door before the book and pen came out. Still dressed in filthy, torn clothes that had seen the inside of a grave earlier, John Winchester folded his hands on the table in front of him and gazed steadily at his son. “So what happened tonight?”

Dean upended his kit onto the hotel carpet along with a fair amount of graveyard dirt. Crouched low, he began sifting through his tools. Buying time. “You don’t think this could wait until we’re *not* covered in dirt and freezing our balls off?”

The hazel eyes did not flicker. “We need to record details while they’re still fresh in our minds.”

Adrenaline still had too strong a hold on Dean’s blood and he felt stretched, taut. He had to think hard before he spoke, guiding the movements of his own mouth lest something escape. “We spent about six hours digging for a body that wasn’t there. So we tried a new incantation to temporarily give the spirit form, then destroy that borrowed body.” He took a breath, and rocked forward on his knees to remove his coat with a wince. “Went to the bridge where the train engine jumped the track and good old Linster lost his head. Found the head in question. You burned it, I went looking for the body.” He laid the jacket out on the floor and rocked back on his heels. Before him in perfect order were his shotgun, Beretta, spare ammo for both, packets of rock salt, lighter fluid, matches, crucifix, holy water, and jacket. He blinked, unsure how the leather jacket could be considered either weapon or protection. Yet it always made the starting lineup. Maybe he should get it blessed by a priest or something.

“Dean.” His father’s voice sounded as tight as Dean felt. Dean met his father’s eyes carefully.

“It got the jump on me, Dad, that’s all.” He rose against protesting muscles. His duffel bag rested on one of the hotel beds, and he unzipped it, grimacing at the smell of unwashed clothes.

John’s eyes stayed on him. “That isn’t the part that worries me. It was sloppy, yes, but not deadly. But you froze, Dean. You hit the ground and you stayed there.” His voice rose a few notches. “What the hell happened? Did you forget that it was real flesh? Did you panic?”

Dean tossed a stained sweater onto the bed a little harder than

necessary, and it slid off onto the floor. “I wasn’t scared.”

“Then what? You came about two seconds away from dying tonight, Dean!” John’s voice hit shouting level. But even in the small room, Dean could hear the echoes of naked fear. “It’d be nice to know why!”

Dean turned a T-shirt aimlessly over in his hands, his eyes on the fabric. “I was waiting for someone else to shoot.”

John threw the pen down on the table so hard Dean was surprised it didn’t stick in the wood. “I didn’t have a fucking gun.” His voice shook with anger, and defensiveness born of guilt.

Dean met his father’s gaze, and said as gently as possible, “I didn’t mean you.”

It took a few moments, and Dean held his father’s gaze until realization flashed there. Then he went back to sorting out his laundry. A completely unnecessary task: it had been two weeks of solid hunting. He hadn’t a clean thing to his name. But it gave him something to do while John processed the revelation that rage and silence and a trip to the furthest edge of the continent could not remove Sam, or the lack thereof.

Dean heartily suspected that if they could sprout gills, his father would have found a job in the center of the Atlantic, and insisted on taking it.

Faintly, John’s chair creaked, and Dean chanced a peek out of the corner of his eye. His father had picked up the pen and set to writing. Dean paused, then reached out to the pile of laundry he’d made, re-sorting the clothes into colored and whites. He couldn’t figure out what else to do with his hands.

“When I first started hunting, I almost got ripped to shreds by a redcap.” John spoke to the pages in front of him, and the pen slid over the paper continuously. “Some idiot Brit tourist brought it over in a crate full of teacups. Little bastard got its talons halfway into my leg before I got a Hail Mary out.” He set down the pen and sat back in his chair. The light above him cast strange shadows on his face, hid his eyes. “But it wasn’t about speed or strength. I’d killed men before, in combat. I was a damn fine soldier; the Corps saw to that. I can fight like hell when the occasion calls for it. But those first couple of times out in the dark… I was lucky to make it back home alive.” He chuckled mirthlessly and rubbed a hand over his face, wiping at mud and sweat. “I wasn’t used to fighting alone, Dean. I kept waiting for a

Marine to have my back."

Dean abandoned the clothes and stood beside the bed with his hands loose at his sides. John's unfathomable eyes moved over him from hair ends to toe nails. He sighed, then stood and closed his journal, set the pen aside.

"You'll get used to it," he continued quietly. "It takes a while, but you'll tweak your fighting style." He crossed to close a hand over Dean's uninjured shoulder and his tired face pulled upward into a genuine, fleeting smile. "You're a good hunter, Dean. You'll make the adjustment."

Dean looked into his father's eyes and had no doubt. Of course he would; no question about it. He smiled and found that his lips turned upward easily, nothing like the previous effort. John patted his son's shoulder once, then turned and headed for the bathroom, shutting the door tight.

And just like the click of a lock, certainty evaporated in a cold hotel room.

-o-

Some bit of metal clanged rhythmically against the interior of a dryer, the only other machine in use. Dean dragged wet clothes from a washer and shoved them roughly into an empty dryer and dropped coins in. He huddled close as hot air leaked out the door onto his skin.

It was Christmas, or thereabouts. He'd forgotten until the laundromat's colored lights flickered across the ice. Bouncing and shifting to keep his body heat up, Dean stared with bleary eyes at the spinning clothes and tried to mentally calculate the date. Only two days of the year mattered anything to him; he estimated all the others in relation. It'd been Cheyenne on November 2nd and Dad had his annual breakdown. A couple days to find him on the street, clean him up, then back on the road, heading South to Texas and mutilated cows. Dean had to take a long way through New Mexico: it took them wide around the black hole in Kansas that would pull his father in and crush him if Dean didn't steer clear and hold on tight enough. A two-day trip to Corpus Christi became three with the extra miles, then a tedious week and a half to track and kill a pair of chupacabras. Two days drive to Memphis, four to deal with a genuine haunted mansion. A week-long lull, then their six-month checkup on a nest of water nymphs on the Michigan coast that kept cropping up. A week there…

then down to Statesville, North Carolina for the Headless Train Conductor of Bostian Bridge.

Which made today… *shit*. December 21st. Too late to ship something to Sam. Not that this small town had much in the way of gift shops.

Dean's gaze wandered to the young woman hunched behind the counter. *Might as well try*. He straightened, scrubbed at his hair, and tried to ignore the fact that he was wearing a pair of striped pajama bottoms as he shuffled over to her.

"Excuse me, Miss." Dean flashed his widest grin, hoping that she wouldn't notice the cut on his bottom lip. An *Elle* dipped and then dropped aside to reveal long sandy hair and freckles. *Not bad*, if he overlooked the dark circles around her eyes. Considering what he looked like, Dean felt generous. *Parents probably ran the laundromat, sent their little baby girl to watch the store at night. With a shotgun under the counter, no doubt.*

"I was wondering if you could give me a hand with something." He leaned against the counter, communicating ease with a body that had none. "I'm just passing through town, on a road trip with my old man."

She smiled a little at that. "Hunting or fishing?"

He smirked back, both to himself and to her. "Hunting. Definitely hunting. Are there actually people crazy enough to fish in this?" He jerked a chin past her out the window.

She laughed and twisted around to consider the ice particles on the window. "Believe it or not, yes. Men 'round here are plain crazy about it." Her movement shifted the blanket wrapped around her and revealed a nicely curved torso. *Not a knockout, but pretty good for a small-town girl, and they always turned out to be the dirty ones*. She turned around just in time to catch the dipping movement of his eyes.

And lightning-fast her face changed, whipping from placid weariness to fear and back so fast that Dean wouldn't have noticed it except the silence went a moment too long and she drew the blanket a little tighter than before.

"There's a hunting lodge two streets down if that's what you're looking for," and her voice definitely rang a note higher.

Dean could sense the change, but couldn't quite read it. "Naw,

actually… looking for a gift shop."

She relaxed a hair. "Last-minute Christmas shopping?"

"Yeahhhh," Dean mock-groaned, pulling out his best *aw, shucks*. "Don't know how Santa does it." He frowned into space thoughtfully. "I guess having super-sonic reindeer and elf slave labor help." Lame, but the tension eased off her brow.

"You lookin' for a new rifle for Dad?"

Dean paused. He hadn't even thought of getting something for his father. It wasn't really something they did. "Naw, got something for him already," his mouth lied for him. *Thanks, mouth*. "But I got this kid brother… he's away at college. Stanford," he added, because he could never bring himself to leave that part out.

Her eyes widened appropriately. "Wow. Your parents must be proud of him."

She looked so genuine and no one else was around, so Dean said softly, "We all are."

Her sleepy-but-awake eyes studied the curl of his voice around those words, and Dean cleared his throat. "He's not the easiest dude to buy presents for, though. He always wants books or something. Nerd of the family and all." He shrugged with a *what you gonna do* air and wow, this was the most normal, honest conversation he'd had in months. With anyone.

She laughed. "Yeah, I know that feeling. Got a little sister." A quick flick of fingers indicated a picture frame beside the cash register. Dean cocked his head and was met with the sight of more braces than he thought could physically fit on a human face. His eyebrows went up before he could stop them, but fortunately she laughed. *Probably the type of big sister who pulled hair.*

"Man. Sam went through that, too." And, to his surprise, he reached into his pocket for the wallet, fingers going past the ever-present Bowie knife strapped to his back. "I used to joke that if he stood above the TV, we could use him as an antennae." A picture slid easily out from between the money and scribbled incantation cheat sheets. In it, a 16-year-old Dean had ahold of his little brother's head, holding it still for the camera while Sam, cheeks flushed and mouth full of metal, fought like hell to pull free and hide. "Sammy would kill me if he knew I was walking around showing this to people."

He held it out to her – *look at us, we're so normal* – and she reached out for it. Their fingers brushed for a fraction of an instant. He'd pulled that move before, but he was tired and talking about his little brother, so it was completely accidental.

Her hand wrenched backward and the picture slid sideways through the air to land somewhere behind the counter. The chair followed it with a crash. Dean raised his eyes to look into the face of absolute fear.

"What - -"

"Please don't," she whimpered. The blanket had fallen and she huddled backward against the frozen window, crumpling in on herself.

Dean moved as slowly as possible, not taking his eyes off of her. He'd seen wild animals look less skittish. "I'm not going to do anything," he said after a moment.

She flinched at the sound of his voice, her breath coming in short pants. "You already raped my little sister, wasn't that enough?" she wailed, her voice breaking at the end and ending in a strangled gasp.

Every hair on Dean's neck stood up straight. "I didn't," he started, then flung himself sideways. The countertop exploded, sending splinters into the space he'd just occupied.

"I won't let you do it to me, too!" she screamed, and the fight part of the fight or flight instinct had obviously kicked in, because she hopped up on top of the counter and aimed the shotgun at him. For a heartbeat that might be his last, Dean stared down the barrel. Then the trigger clicked. She hadn't reloaded. One of his hands reached out of its own accord and closed on the gun barrel, wrenching it sideways. She went with it, and hit the ground hard beside him.

"NO!" She released the gun and flailed, striking him with fists, feet, anything, pushing backwards with the force of desperation. "Nonononononono!"

Her knee, twisting around, rose up and drove, more from the chance of movement than design or skill. Dean saw it come, and tried to block. But his body pinned one arm under him, and the other hand gripped the shotgun.

He had the brief impression of her eyes, black-tinted when they

should be green, before pain exploded in his forehead and he fell backwards into empty waters.

-o-

His mother had a hold of his cheek, laughing in his ear as she pinched and pulled the thin flesh.

“Mom, let go!” Dean whined. His voice echoed wrong in the kitchen, but he didn’t want to know, he didn’t want to know…

Mary laughed and he looked up. Her eyes glimmered black, and her hands were covered in blood. She smiled, and her teeth shown white and sharp.

-o-

Dean lurched upright from the vacuum of dreams, and his cheek tore free of the icy pavement to which it had been frozen a moment before. “Ohhhhh,” he groaned, clapping a hand to the side of his face. His fingers encountered wetness, and he drew his fingers away to stare in confusion at liquid that changed hues in the blink of colored lights. He blinked, following the path of illumination to a store front. *Happy Holidays!* the enormous painted snowman screamed down at him, leering. Frosty’s coal-black eyes stared blankly as Dean shifted and bent, getting his feet underneath him. His forehead throbbed, and the cut in his lip had torn open again. He touched it gingerly, then reached past it into his own mind, grasping.

The mockery of his mother’s laughing face still danced before his eyes, but slowly it melted into younger, more delicate features. They stared, then widened in terror, screaming.

His feet almost went back out from under him as he staggered backwards, but he wind-milled his arms once and saved himself from a sore ass. Pain stabbed behind his eyes at the abrupt movement and Dean groaned, pressing palms over his eyes. His pulse beat against the sides of his skull, and it felt as though nothing but his own hands prevented his brain from fracturing outward in a spray of synapses over the faint layer of dirty snow in the parking lot.

The parking lot. He lowered his hands, staring around him. *How had he gotten out here?* A few dozen feet away, the Impala crouched in her parking spot, silent and watchful. Beyond her, the blinking Christmas

lights hung in the laundromat's window stabbed into the darkness, and he flinched, squinting his eyes against even their faint glow.

The parking lot. The laundromat. The girl.

Her face loomed before him again, and he held the spot on his forehead where she'd nailed him. *What the hell happened in there?* He'd looked at her once – *okay, maybe twice* – hadn't touched anything more than her fingertips. Jesus, he'd shown her pictures of his kid brother. And she'd looked at him like a dangerous animal.

No sooner had that thought passed the invisible lips of his mind than another came to him. *He was, technically. Dangerous. An animal. He'd killed – not people, never people!* the first thought protested – *he'd fought and made things bleed.* He straightened and passed an unconscious hand over his face. *Had she seen? Had she looked straight through the shield of Sam's reflected normalcy into the hours spent crouched in a graveyard among lifeless things?* The remembered stench of old death rose up to him again, and he doubled over, trying to hold down his stomach. She must have smelled it too, must have sensed the presence of death that clung to him and read her own demise there.

But just as quickly, that line of thought wavered and fell. *She hadn't begged for her life… she'd begged for* – His mind refused to go further than that. *That - - that was* not *him.* Never would be. Whatever she'd seen in him that so terrified her, it wasn't… *that.*

He swallowed hard, swiping at his mouth, peering out into the dark. Darkness stared back, utterly devoid of terrified, irrational teenage girls. With his luck, she was probably the captain of the cross-country team, and had sprinted headlong straight into the nearest house screaming rape. The belated thought of concerned citizens and vengeful fathers spurred him into motion, and Dean skidded across frozen ground towards the laundromat.

The miniature jingle bells on the door tinkled as he pushed through and fluorescent lights forcibly constricted his pupils. Squeezing pained eyes shut, he listened for the sound of machinery. Nothing moved, no hum of electricity or tumble of cloth, and he tensed. He must have been out longer than he thought. He'd have to grab the clothes, get Dad, and beat tracks before every pitchfork-waving villager…

"Dean."

Dean opened his eyes. His father stood beside the partially-shattered counter.

And stretched atop the counter lay the laundromat girl. A gash arched perfectly across her throat, the straight, deep cut of a master butcher.

Every organ in Dean's chest froze simultaneously. From the tiniest blood capillary to the inner webbing of his lungs, everything closed tight as a fist and congealed together into a solid mass.

"Dean," his father said again. Dean raised his eyes from the endless pool of rust-dark blood to his father's face, and his lungs sucked in one spurt of cold air, then froze again. John Winchester was staring at his eldest son with a mixture of pain, anger, sadness, and…

Loathing. Pure and undisguised disgust.

"What have you done?" John asked, the words wavering.

Dean swallowed against his thick tongue and shook his head once, though in confusion or denial he did not know. His throat would not work.

"What have you done, Dean?" John's voice rose. "When you didn't come back, I came down here looking for you. I found you in the parking lot standing over her." He gestured sharply to the body next to him, but kept his flinty eyes locked on Dean's.

Dean choked, "I didn't –"

"Didn't what?" John stepped forward, and the air around him seemed to waver with the force of his anger. "What didn't you do, Dean? You want to stand there covered in her blood and tell me what you *didn't* do? Didn't attack this girl? Didn't chase her out into the parking lot? Didn't cut her throat with your own *goddamned Bowie knife*?" As he spoke, he raised his right hand and threw something down. A knife, silver covered in red, spun across the floor to come to a rest at Dean's feet. Staring down, his fingers sprang to life and scrabbled under his jacket, across his back… to an empty sheath. He looked back up at his father and the solid weight inside his chest grew heavier.

"Any of this coming back to you?" John's face twisted up into an ugly grimace of a smile, but his eyes shown with tears. "Do you remember slicing her neck open outside? How about attacking *me* when I came up? You remember that?" For the first time, Dean realized that his father's left arm was pinned tightly to his side, protecting ribs. "I thought for sure you must be possessed, but I said all the right words and not a thing happened. You didn't even flinch, didn't hesitate. You almost killed me, Dean." John's voice broke as he said the last word,

and Dean had never heard a more terrifying sound.

"No!" Dean's voice came back to him, and he shook his head frantically. The cold glass of the front door pressed against his spine, but he could not remember backing into it. There was a faint buzzing in his ears, and unless his lungs started operating again, he was going to suffocate. But it didn't matter, not if… "I didn't. I wouldn't."

His father glared at him, but his face had lost its vehemence. The fluorescent lights cast shadows in places there had not been a few moments before, and John suddenly looked very, very old.

"I can't protect you from this, Dean," he said, and his voice echoed low and rough with grief. "I told you before that you had to learn to fight alone… but I always would have fought with you, through anything. I loved you. But this…" He regarded the young body next to him, then turned his face sharply away.

The heavy thing inside Dean burst and exploded outward through his veins, filling him with ice. *I loved you, but…* He wanted to tear his skin open at the seams, to snatch up the knife from the floor and match the slash on the girl's throat with his own. He was going to, he would, right now.

And, kneeling on the floor with his hand outstretched, a single thought came to him like a candle flame that flickered in a dark room. Something his father had said, or not said. *I said all the right words*, but he had not named them.

As his fingers closed around the hilt of his bloody knife, Dean whispered only one word.

"Christo."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then his father turned his head back around and black eyes stared into Dean's.

Dean rocked backward. The ice inside clung to him. He bared his teeth, snarling against the pressure that closed around his throat. "Jesus Christ, Allah, Yahweh, Gaia, you *mother*fucking *son* of a *BITCH!*"

On the last word he lunged upright, staggering backwards. His heart beat wildly, his limbs shook with the aftereffects, but he had a knife in his hand and his back to a wall. He raised his head and looked across a stretch of bloody linoleum to the demon inside his father's body.

It hadn't moved, except to turn one lip upward in a faint smile, or sneer. "Impressive," it said mildly. "I hadn't thought you were strong enough."

It ached to breathe, like he'd been punched a dozen times in the ribs. Dean gritted his teeth, shifting to relocate his balance. "Guess you haven't been following us very long, then, huh?"

It rolled disdainful eyes. "Please. Don't give yourself or this old man that much credit. I was here long before you, reaping the fear that convenient ghost roused in the local livestock." It cocked John Winchester's head toward the lifeless girl, and smiled wide. "There's nothing quite as tasty as irrational terror of the unknown. It's so easy to manipulate, especially in weak little minds like hers."

"Get out of my dad, asshole."

"Or what?" One eyebrow rose in an expression of lazy indifference, an alien look for his father's face. *But it wasn't his father, not his father*. "The blade of that knife may be blessed, but this - " the arms spread wide " – is still your daddy's flesh, despite the little mantra that you're repeating to yourself. And even if you could remember the words to the exorcism that you're so desperately trying to recall, I doubt you would get it out in time. Your toys are all back at the hotel. Your dear precious beloved *Sammy* is several thousand miles away and your father is mine. There's no one here to save you from your mistakes, Dean, and we both know that you'll make one." It smiled, wide and vicious. "But let's say, for the sake of amusement, that you do find a way to loosen my hold on your father's mind. There's still the delicate little problem of *this*."

It reached out one splayed hand and rested it delicately on the girl's pale face. She stared sightlessly through his father's fingers. Dean wrenched his gaze away, swallowing hard.

"Which one of you did it, I wonder?" the demon purred softly. "Do you remember whose hand I used to draw your knife across her lovely little throat? I do."

"Deus," Dean spat, and threw the knife.

It dodged sideways, snarling in surprise, and the window of the storefront exploded in a swirling storm of glass. But Dean had already pushed away, sprinting forward after the knife, and lowered his shoulder to strike right at the apex of his father's rib cage as the demon straightened. They went down together in a heap and Dean felt

an explosion of heat above him.

Hands rose up, driving at his throat, but Dean twisted sideways, sweeping one arm in a semi-circle to capture both his father's wrists in one armpit. He brought the other fist down in a few punishing blows. *Two or three good hits, that's all I've got before…*

A wave of invisible violence hit him square in the chest, lifting him off the demon and flinging him backwards through the blown-out window. Dean hit the pavement outside hard, breath driven from his body. Another flare of heat washed over him and he raised his head weakly. Before him, the laundromat exploded in a wall of fire. For a moment, his heart stopped… but then his father came leaping through the empty window frame, face twisted in a mask of rage, eyes pitch black. The demon inside straightened, only steps away.

Dean could have laughed. He would have, if he'd had breath to spare.

He rolled, twisted, scrambled the last few feet of ice-covered pavement. Heard the demon laugh for him, triumphant and mocking. Reached one hand, covered in his own blood – *or the girl's* – behind the front tire of the Impala – *baby, sweetheart, angel* – to the small flask taped to her undercarriage, their father's best flask that Sammy had years ago emptied of whiskey and refilled with his *emergency supply* and Dean had laughed and teased mercilessly, and never breathed a word.

Hands closed tight on the back of his neck. He wrenched the flask free, popped the lid with one finger, rolled over...

And threw it.

Framed against a wall of fire, the demon screamed in rage with his father's voice as an arc of holy water rose before it and fell.

-o-

It was morning and the midpoint to Atlanta, before John Winchester woke up. He did so in a hurry, hands lunging in various directions before stilling. They settled on the door handle and the seat before he spoke. "Where are we?"

Dean glanced over at him. He'd switched off the radio hours ago, after the early news reported a tragic fire that claimed the life of the seventeen-year-old captain of the Statesville High School girl's lacrosse team.

“Road to Atlanta,” Dean replied after a moment. Then, because deep bruises and the splotches of irritated skin left behind by holy water made it impossible to overlook, “You got possessed by a demon last night. Came out looking for me, got grabbed somehow.” John turned toward him and Dean refocused on the road. “It was a Barbas. Nasty one… came for the haunting, stayed for the Winchesters.”

Silence met this statement, and in it, the echoes virtually shouted. *Dad, Dad, help me. I think something really bad happened.* The pit of Dean’s stomach turned over, and he clenched his teeth, waiting.

His father, the last living thing left to him, asked, “How did you beat it?”

The horizon showed a patchwork of broken clouds, where dawn light poked through. Beside him, the pages of his father’s journal rustled as he turned them, and John raised his pen. In that silence of expectation, Dean knew, at last, how wrong he’d been. He’d agonized all night over a cut throat, one knife, and two hands, and in the morning light, he understood at last that he needn’t have bothered.

His lips quirked sideways. “Luck, mostly,” his mouth said in a rueful tone, and Sam would have heard it. Sam would have turned with watchful dark eyes and heard the echoes, reached through them and drawn out the unspoken words. But he knew now that theirs had been a language of two. *A language of twins, except not.*

His father bent over paper, making notations. A huge, crushing swell of emotion rose up beneath Dean’s scarred skin, and he could almost make himself believe that it was relief.

-o-

It was another six hours before they stopped, sore and tired. Another seven before he got up quietly and walked barefoot through icy rain, shaking with cold and other things. Another eight before he found a pay phone behind a restaurant. The deserted streets hung empty: he’d been off a few days in his calculations and it was Christmas Eve.

He had to redial four times: his unsteady fingers kept punching wrong numbers. Sam was laughing when he answered. “Hello?” he asked, his voice bright and clear, and music tinkled in the background. “Hello? Hell-oooo…”

Dean slammed the receiver down so hard the plastic cracked. *Sam would know. Sam would hear the echoes, would ask.* A deep shudder

passed through him. *He'd want to know, the little wannabe lawyer, would pick apart the evidence and apply logic. He'd* need *to know the truth*. The blackness of night filled his eyes, and in it, he saw only his father's face filled with hatred. *But for his son? Or himself?*

Did it matter? Either way, it was Dean's fault. He'd let some little girl knock him out and she'd died. A to B, there, done. He'd fucked up, she was dead. If there was karma, he'd develop cancer; if Hell was real, he was bound. *So what the fuck difference did it make?*

It would matter to his father, but he, apparently, was deaf. *Bless him. Damn him.*

It would matter to Sam. And Sam would know. *Bless him. Damn him.*

Echoes would destroy them all, in different ways. Silence might destroy one, but then again, he did need to learn the fine art of fighting alone. So he turned and walked back to the hotel room, and spent an hour in the shower saving his toes from frost bite. His father asked about it, he lied, and his father didn't hear the echoes. Sam would have heard them, even long-distance. So Dean waited for the echoes to die.

Across the country, in a warm place, his little brother – *his twin* – waited too, and waited and waited, and then, misunderstanding the long silence, did not wait anymore.

And that was the end of the 253rd day.

Chapter 3: The 418th Day: Hell Hath No Fury

The 418th Day: Hell Hath No Fury

They'd already been deeply irritated before pulling into the gas station and the ensuing argument bordered on dangerous territory. In daylight, seated comfortably in an air-conditioned room, Dean could swear on his soul with all honesty that he would never raise a hand against his father.

Significantly, however, he would never swear it on *Sam's* soul. Because there were occasionally nights like the blazer in Arizona, when Mother Nature – the fucking bitch – refused to drop the temperature below 100 (even past midnight), and they'd almost both lost their throats to a werewolf near the Utah border – not because it was a particularly big werewolf, John had just gotten bored on the stakeout and chugged a couple beers – and a cement-like mixture of blood and mud had dried in Dean's hair, and both their legs were exhausted to the point of tremors from hiking up the side of a gulley, and John had dislocated his shoulder falling *down* said gulley, and the only reason it wasn't a broken neck was the helpful blackberry briar he'd landed in, and *SWEET JESUS* the Impala had a scrape on her right side.

The presence of loaded and half-loaded weapons scattered on the car seat around them didn't help matters, of course.

"Fuck you," John snapped.

"Fuck *you*," Dean spat.

In the faint yellowish glow of the convenience store, John's scratch-covered face darkened further. "Don't talk to your father that way."

"Dude, you just said it to me!"

"Dean, you're being a child!" John thundered. "Considering the night we've had, we're both about ten steps away from dehydration. Now this is the only miserable gas station in this miserable town that's still open. Go get us water. "

"Sure, yeah, okay." Dean sat back and waved at his appearance. "I'll just wander in wearing the entrails of our bait cow. I'm sure the cashier won't mind. Sure he won't call the cops. You go in."

“My shoulder is dislocated, Dean,” his father replied with steady, slow patience, his most dangerous tone.

“And whose fault is that?” Dean inquired sarcastically. *Oh, this is going nowhere good.* “I’m surprised you could see well enough to shoot the damn werewolf, because you sure as shit were too drunk to run straight!”

Aaaaaand, scene.

-o-

A polite digital *ding* sounded as the door opened, and the dulcet tones of Rob Zombie filled their ears. The cashier raised a pierced face as Dean and John entered, cast them a bored glance, and did a double-take.

“Where are your bandageth?” John asked around his swollen tongue. The cramped front seat had prevented full-fledged swings, but they’d both given it one good effort.

The cashier straightened slowly, glancing back and forth between the two of them. Dean didn’t pause for the scrutiny but marched heavily towards the freezers that lined the far wall, holding one eye. Opening a frosted door, he plucked out two clear bottles with one hand. “I’ll be right outside,” he announced to the air. The air did not respond, and he chuckled grimly to himself. *This is gonna be fun.*

Outside he stripped off the stained tank top, hissing as it brushed an abrasion on the underside of his left arm, and then upended a whole bottle into his hair. The ice-cold water on his overheated skin made him shriek higher than he would ever admit possible, and he clenched his eyes shut, breathing outward in little huffs.

Behind him the *ding* came again. Dean waited, but nothing disturbed the silence except the retort of a bug zapper. “*What?*” he finally snapped.

“He thays they have a hothe,” his father replied shortly.

They did have a hose, full of pressurized water that was significantly warmer than the bottled variety. They both stripped down to boxers, John dropped a few quarters in the machine, and Dean turned the hose on his father with a great deal of private satisfaction at the resulting yelp.

But by the end of the makeshift shower, a different sound was coming out of John's throat and Dean turned off the spray of water to stare in open-mouthed incredulity as the older man, dripping, doubled over with laughter. For a moment he thought of blood alcohol levels, but it'd been hours. The notion of insanity seemed plausible… but then his father raised his face, nearly breathless with amusement, and what shown there was neither the flushed languor of drunkenness nor the twisted glee of dementia. It was exhaustion transformed into giddiness, the last weary gasp of adrenaline changed into a grin.

John straightened, touched his shoulder with a grimace and stepped forward to snatch the hose nozzle from his son's hands. "Give me that, you thadithtic little prick," he said, and laughed.

Three minutes of pressurized liquid later, Dean lay flat on his back on the pavement under the endless Arizona sky, laughing so hard he couldn't stand. John stood nearby, holding himself upright with one hand on the Impala, gasping for breath.

When he could speak again, Dean said, "Fuck you."

"Fuck *you*," his father replied and cracked up.

Forty minutes later, with fresh clothes on their backs, the Impala's tank refilled and the guns stowed, Dean took a risk. "No more alcohol on the job."

John looked up from his journal which he'd laid out atop the car's hood. Shadows fell across his eyes and for a moment Dean felt a stab of fear, thought he'd misjudged. But then his father sighed and straightened, nodding. "No more alcohol on the job," he agreed.

The stab of fear turned upward into something lighter. "Scout's honor?"

John chuckled. "You aren't a trusting sort, are you?"

"I learned from the best," Dean smirked but did not look away.

John considered him a moment in silence then raised his good arm. "I swear on your mother's grave, I'll never drink on the job again."

Dean stared. He hadn't expected it, couldn't say he was grateful for it, but he knew it was the one vow his father would never break. The moment held a few beats longer as the two men regarded one another in the early morning light. Then John looked down at his journal and

Dean turned to shut the trunk, glancing past it into the convenience store's window.

"So how about our attendant, huh?" Dean grinned, jerking his chin. "Kinda impressed that we're not surrounded with negotiators right now."

John raised his eyebrows without looking up. "He strikes me as the anti-establishment type."

Dean chuckled. "You want some breakfast? I feel like giving the guy one last thrill."

"Something salty," John called to his son's back. Dean waved once without turning, hiding his smile.

The cashier looked up as he entered then pretended not to look. But he'd been reading the same page in his magazine all night and Dean watched him out of the corner of his eye as he collected the world's most unhealthy breakfast. Pale skin seemed pallid against black hair and fingernails (which was no doubt the desired effect) and rings curled through eyebrows, nose, and lip. But he had an angular face full of fine, delicate bones, and full lips. He was shorter and younger and fragile in more ways than one despite his effort to hide behind sullenness.

Dean didn't swing that way often for steadiness of the proverbial boat. But his father was occupied with his precious journal and Sam was about five hundred miles away on another planet. So as he laid his selection out on the counter, Dean raised knowing eyes and said, "Cow entrails."

Dark eyes that had hidden behind cautious disinterest all night lifted like a morning sun. Dean grinned and reeled him in. "They were cow entrails, in case you were wondering. Dad and I worship, well, *differently*."

-o-

A touch of irritation had returned to John Winchester's face by the time Dean plopped into the Impala's front seat. "What took so long?"

Dean slid a hastily-scribbled address into his pocket. "Getting directions to a decent hotel, if you must know," he half-lied, smiling as he turned the key in the ignition.

-o-

The hotel, it turned out, was staffed by a pair of other anti-establishment types who glowered with practiced disdain until Dean mentioned Merrill from the gas station. At that, the heavyset female desk clerk and her slouching boyfriend (whom Dean mentally dubbed Princess Rainbow and Fluffy) straightened. And when Dean complimented Fluffy's Crux Satanas, an available room suddenly became discounted.

They were all Satanists, it turned out, or at least identified themselves as such. Not the academic Anton LaVey "down with Christianity" types, nor the knife-wielding, robe-wearing psychos depicted in the media. Just five kids with crooked edges living in the smooth lines of rural, God-fearin' Page, Arizona. Dean met them all in the lobby later that day, after he'd set his father's shoulder and forced a few painkillers down his throat. Stepping out into the wasting heat of an Arizona afternoon for ice, Dean had glanced across the parking lot and seen a slender pair of shoulders topped with black hair.

He'd left the ice bucket in the hall and followed.

They'd all gathered behind the counter and had just settled into air-conditioned comfort after a long hot day at their various menial jobs when he came in the door. A pale, freckle-covered girl with spiked blue hair lurched to one side, hands reaching to shove a paper bag into hiding before Fluffy waved her off. "Hey Dean," he greeted coolly, slouching so loosely against the counter that he might have been nothing but boneless flesh.

Blue Spike's hands still nudged the disguised six pack underneath her chair until Dean gave her his widest grin and froze her stuttering fingers. "Hi," he said to her. "I'm Dean."

She gaped back wordlessly. Dean turned his grin on the others. Moisture leftover from the shower slid over his skin, mingling with sweat; the skin exposed by his wife beater shown sun-bronzed; his hair, cropped short, stood up in damp spikes.

Across the room, a pair of ebony eyes stared with the others. Dean caught them and his smile widened a little. *Thank you, gods of good genetics*.

Curving lips turned upwards as if their owner could read Dean's thoughts. "Hey, Dean," Merrill greeted. He sat in a rolling computer chair, knees drawn up and thrown over the arms. Gone was the sullen

demeanor and thankfully the lip and nose rings had been replaced with studs, though he'd kept the eyebrow in. That eyebrow arched upward. "No cow entrails today?"

Dean laughed, and raised his arms wide to either side, palms facing skyward. "The night is young, and so am I."

It took longer than he thought it would, actually. Not that he minded: it surprised him pleasantly how little he had to lie to them, even after whiskey replaced the beer and they'd all moved to the floor for Black Jack. He taught Fluffy and Princess Rainbow how to cheat at poker, discussed the finer points of paganism with Bernie the Wannabe Anti-Christ, a verbose college dropout with an inverted pentagram drawn with Sharpie on his forehead, and even managed to coax conversation out of Blue Spike (who had come into town herself a few months ago), though she still stared at him like he was an alien. They delighted in his illicit card skills and expansive knowledge of alternative religions, barely blinked at the number of places he'd lived, and asked no questions about family. They even accepted the story of cow entrails sacrificed to the full moon, which wasn't entirely a lie.

They'd all found each other in a similar fashion over the years, circling every new member cautiously to catalogue wounds and defects until they settled into happy acceptance of communal rejection. Shuffling the deck in a lull between games, Dean watched them all move around him. *Like a family*, he thought. One as necessary and elemental as any blood kin. They were all in their late teens, and probably knew a lot less about their professed religion than Dean did. They played at Satanism, imagining that it involved a lot of animal sacrifice, sex, and immorality. In reality it had a lot more to do with trading one set of rules for another. But they needed the identification, just like they needed each other to accept and validate the weirdness within in the ways that only family could.

His gaze drifted over to the quietest member of the family. His fingers stilled on the cards.

"Fuck," Princess Rainbow announced, sitting back in disgust. "We're out of whiskey."

Without taking his eyes from Dean's, Merrill said, "I'll get more."

Dean shifted his attention to the cards, smiling to himself and letting it play out. Merrill had this one figured out and Dean was more than happy to go along with the plan.

“You gonna get it from work?” Fluffy asked, frowning as he tried to focus on Merrill’s face. “Isn’t that bitch Kim working tonight?”

“Naw,” Merrill replied, standing and stretching. Dean watched out of the corner of his eye as clothing lifted and limbs extended. “I thought I’d try the liquor store on sixth. Steve works there part-time. He’s cool, hardly ever cards.”

Princess Rainbow shook her head. “Steve’s down in Phoenix. His parents finally got divorced and his mom moved.”

Merrill considered for a moment. But only for a moment. “Hey Dean,” he asked, turning, “you’re over twenty-one, right?”

-o-

They hit the parking lot just as a roll of thunder rattled the windows. Around them the air hung thick with the smell of wet dust and the snap of electricity. It was the dinner hour: the streets stood empty. On the horizon, massive thunderclouds dispensed rain in gray smudges to brown land below. In the silence before one hell of a night’s thunderstorm, the world took a breath and held it and Dean shivered in the atmosphere of anticipation.

“Most people head indoors for these.” Merrill spoke beside his ear, close. “Sometimes we get hail big as golf balls.” He paused. “You still wanna go?”

Dean cocked one eyebrow at him. “Mother Nature can go fuck herself. We have felonies to commit.”

Merrill laughed, for the first time. It was a low, easy sound that made Dean shiver in an entirely different way.

They made it halfway to wherever Merrill was taking him when the rain hit, in such force and amount that it looked like a bucket had been poured on the windshield. Dean, laughing in amazement and just a little bit of apprehension, had to pull over until the heaviest of it passed.

For all that it had taken them almost four hours to get there (well, sixteen if that first cautious meeting in the gas station counted), Merrill wasted no time, sliding across the seat and setting his teeth gently against the skin of Dean’s neck before the key was even out of the ignition. *That’s the great thing about guys*, Dean thought with a faint smile as tongue replaced teeth, *no foreplay necessary, no questions*

asked, and no strings attached, unless you want them. Dean leaned back, transferring his hands from the wheel to the younger man – *boy* – and pulling him closer. Merrill rocked his hips forward, opening his legs until he straddled Dean's lap.

When he spoke, his lips moved against Dean's. "Were they really cow entrails?"

Dean laughed softly. "Yeah. Why, do I strike you as the serial killer type?" Hips moved over his, and he gasped involuntarily. "I hate to point this out," he went on in a faltering whisper, "but it's probably a little late to worry if I'm gonna knife you."

His only reply was the ghost of that same low laughter, and then lips opened against his and Dean stopped thinking altogether. It was a rare thing, a glorious one, this ability to completely shut his brain off and simply *move*. There was inductive reasoning, he'd once told Sam with a cocky smile, and there was deductive reasoning, and then there was Deanductive reasoning. It worked for him on hunts – *shotgun aim trigger recoil* – and now he let that same mindless problem-solving take over. Clothing under his hands – *pull slide off*. Not enough room to maneuver – *backseat grab lift push follow*. No protection or lube – *sweat spit hope*.

A flash and nearly-instantaneous clap of thunder made them both flinch and Merrill half-laughed, half-gasped breathlessly, clutching Dean's shoulder. He arched against the car seat, his body a strange combination of sharp angles and softness, dark eyes and pale skin. And fear, too, in the end, want all tangled up in hurt as Dean moved inside him. *They didn't ask about family, none of them*, Dean thought distantly and bent to press gentle lips against the back of Merrill's neck, tasting the salt of sweat and feeling a fast pulse beat beneath the skin. Shaky fingers grabbed the edge of the car seat and Dean rose, pressing closer and deeper until they inhaled the same whiskey-scented air, breathing each other in fast pants until Dean groaned and bent his face to a slender shoulder blade, shuddering with release.

Merrill hadn't lied: somewhere along the way the rain had turned to marble-sized hail.

-o-

Outside the lobby doors, Merrill paused on wobbly legs. "You gonna be around for a while?"

Dean stopped too and looked at the boy in the darkness. Rain had

plastered long black hair into his face, accenting the high cheekbones. He shrugged carefully. “Maybe. Not sure.”

Merrill hesitated for a moment. But only for a moment. “You still got that address?”

Dean shifted the clinking paper sack of illicit alcohol, pulling out the frayed and slightly damp piece of paper. Merrill laid down his sack full of corn chips and guacamole, and drew out a pen, crouching to use his leg as a writing surface.

“In case you’re still in town tomorrow,” he said quietly, handing the paper back. Then he picked up his supplies and headed in the door, not glancing back.

Home, he’d written on the back, and below that, another address. Dean pocketed it and headed after him.

-o-

Luckily they were low on supplies. The werewolf had taken a shitload of their silver and the process of melting the metal down and reshaping it into bullets took time and money. Time went to John, money went to Dean.

Both were solved by Merrill. Home, it turned out, was with Bernie the Wannabe Anti-Christ and Blue Spike (Kristen) in a rundown house on the edge of town. Weeds overran the yard, weather had chipped off most the paint, and the door hung at a funny angle. Merrill glanced at him with a glimmer of embarrassment; but Dean only noted the abandoned work shed in back and the relative privacy, and smiled. If John had any negative opinions about the place he kept them to himself; merely grunted and set up shop in the work shed. Bernie’s Sharpie pentagram had given him a moment’s pause, though.

“They’re Satanists,” he said to Dean in the driveway beside the Impala’s open trunk.

Dean hefted out a duffel bag before he turned to face his father. “They’re kids, Dad. Bernie’s the only one who’s studied Latin, and his pronunciation sucks. Merrill’s a vegan; we probably face more danger from his cooking than their religious beliefs.”

John didn’t look entirely convinced, but grunted again and shut the trunk.

Dean got a job at the gas station with Merrill, after That Bitch Kim turned out to be pregnant and quit. He took mostly graveyard shifts, earning seven bucks an hour sitting behind the counter. For the most part, it was lifeless: maybe half a dozen people came by per night and not even the security cameras worked properly.

But Merrill kept him company on his nights off and Dean returned the favor.

And for four weeks, it was peaceful. Not happy, but something close to it. John worked on the silver supply, melting down pieces in the shed's small wood stove. If he had any awareness of Merrill (or more specifically, Merrill-and-Dean) he gave no sign and the Mini-Satanists all instinctively cut a wide berth around him and the tool shed. He drank some, but technically, this wasn't a job and Dean couldn't have cared less, so long as the old man didn't set himself on fire. They rented an upstairs room from Bernie, who blinked and shrugged when they offered two hundred for the month. There was only one bed, but Dean and John were rarely around at the same time. Dean slept in the mornings, rising in the mid-afternoon and shuffling downstairs to the ant-infested kitchen. Usually he found Merrill seated at the table, yawning and tousle-headed, munching on toast. After the first week, he also found another piece casually nudged across to him. Kristen moved in the background, coming and going at irregular hours and still staring at Dean with wide eyes.

At about six in the evening Bernie came home. For a little while Dean wondered about him and Merrill; but Bernie seemed completely asexual, preferring to read and argue about philosophy than fuck anyone. One night, after Dean had gone down on Merrill in the gas station restroom and was spitting come into the sink, Merrill explained that they'd met in Las Vegas.

"I was fucking for money," he said tonelessly as he used a paper towel to wipe himself off, "and this one night, I didn't want to do it anymore, so I stepped in front of a car." He lifted his head and gave a lopsided smile. "Bernie had good brakes."

Dean regarded him in the dirty mirror, then looked away. *No strings, unless you want them.*

In the evenings before Dean and Merrill left for work, they all headed to the hotel, where Danielle (Princess Rainbow) and Devin (Fluffy) worked until midnight. They drank, played cards, told lewd jokes, and, on the weekends, snuck into vacant rooms to smoke pot and

watch crappy cable movies. Invariably these weekend nights ended with a few unconscious bodies on the floor and a few others wrapped around each other. Dean couldn't quite get used to sex with an audience, but the hotel's maids kept its bathroom floors surprisingly clean. Or so Merrill reported with an incoherent giggle, lying facedown on the tile with Dean's teeth on the back of his neck.

It wasn't happy, but it was something close, closer than Dean had been since Sam had gone away.

It lasted four weeks.

-o-

On the fourth week Dean saw her for the first time just as he stepped out of the Impala. He'd been working for twelve hours and had almost fallen asleep a few times on the ride home. Beside him, Merrill didn't have his reservations and had passed out with his cheek pressed against the glass. Dean was walking around the front of the car to the passenger side when something tickled across his skin, raising hairs, and he looked up in time to see a battered blue pickup pause in the street, then accelerate.

The faint outline of a woman's face stared through the window at him.

He paused, watching her go as dulled instincts lurched awake and shrieked in alarm. Merrill muttered sleepily as Dean hustled him inside, but there came no pursuit and he almost wrote the whole thing off to sleep-deprived paranoia.

And then he saw her again and this time it was no accidental glimpse. Three days later she stood on the opposite side of the street from the supermarket and stared directly at him. Dean, one hand clutching a shopping bag and the other holding his coat in a tent over Merrill's head, flinched at the honk of a car and stared back. The rain beat down on her hair and plastered her wind breaker to her shoulders, but she barely seemed to notice the downpour. A still figure among wind and hurrying bodies that made no move, merely waited.

Fortunately they'd forgotten peanut butter and about an hour later the rain stopped. Dean slid out the front door with a Glock tucked in the back of his pants, his Bowie knife strapped just above it, a protection charm wound around one fist and a bottle of holy water in the other hand. But he was alone; Dad had passed out among spilled beer in the tool shed.

The blue pickup sat across the street, waiting, and he moved towards it slowly across wet pavement that glistened in the noon sun.

About a dozen feet away, he stopped as the car door opened and she stepped out. She was tall, barely an inch shorter than Dean, and heavy with the flesh and muscle of a working life. Jeans covered her legs down to worn working boots, and underneath the unzipped windbreaker she wore a T-shirt and flannel. Brown hair hung loose in damp tangles, with a few streaks of gray. If he'd seen her from behind, or the side, he'd have called her a middle-aged ranch wife.

If not for her eyes. The rest of her face was unexceptional: a straight nose and high cheekbones defied age with their elegance, but her lips drew together in an unforgiving tight line, her eyebrows slashed too sharply, and she had more frown lines than smiles. But her eyes… they shown hard and sharp, a clear shocking green.

No everyday housewife lived behind eyes that watchful.

Another line drew itself between her razor eyebrows as she regarded Dean. He had the distinct impression that she was trying to figure him out, and wasn't having much success.

"So," he said after a long moment of mutual scrutiny.

"So." She had a low, raspy voice, full of cold nights and cigarette smoke.

There was still a good ten feet between them, but no one had his back and he didn't have any better ideas. "Christo," Dean chanced.

She cocked her head to one side and blinked. Green did not change to black. "Beg your pardon?" she asked, but there was neither surprise nor confusion in her intonation. Dean considered chucking the holy water at her, fingering the bottle. Her gaze fell on that tiny movement and suddenly her brows parted, her face cleared, and thin lips twitched upward at the ends. "Ah," she said, in the tone of discovery. "Ah."

Dean felt an unaccountable spurt of anxiety, knowing that the riddle he'd presented had been solved and wondering what conclusion she'd arrived at; her smile was not an entirely pleasant thing. His discomfiture only increased when she walked forward, took the bottle straight from his hand, popped the lid and drank several mouthfuls.

"Holy water?" she inquired with a smirk, handing the bottle back.

Dean took it slowly, careful to keep his weight on his back foot. Not a demon, not anything evil in nature could take a swig of holy water and survive. But plenty of things in the world didn't *start* evil and still wound up that way.

Irritation replaced anxiety. "OK, I was here first, lady. You're the stalker, you start."

She scowled, matching him. "No I'm not, and no you weren't."

Dean glared. She glared. Finally he ground out, "Dean Winchester."

That meant approximately nothing to her. "What brings you to Page, Arizona, Dean Winchester?" Her eyes flickered past him to the house, and Dean felt that same spurt of apprehension. Somewhere behind him, his Dad drooled in his sleep and Merrill…

"I think it's your turn." His back foot was planted. If she wasn't a demon, he could take her, or at least wound her badly before she got to the front door.

His posture did not escape her. She read every line of tension in the way only a trained fighter would and the unpleasant smile returned. "Melissa," she said finally. "Melissa Darnell. What are you doing here, Mr. Winchester?"

The honorific sounded mocking in her mouth. "Trying to earn a living, Mrs. Darnell," he snapped back.

Dean had been to every state in the lower 48 by the time he was twelve. Everywhere, he'd seen fear, pain, and above all, grief. The fresh agony of a mother for her dismembered son; the old ache of a man for the wife who mysteriously vanished years ago; the quiet brokenness of a massacre's solitary survivor. He'd hunted grief his entire adult life (and some of his childhood), seeking its various sources in the shadows. If he ever forgot what it looked like, all he had to do was turn to the men beside him, or look in the mirror.

He knew grief. He'd survived his father's, his brother's, his own. It was his heritage, his only inheritance.

He had never seen grief like the kind that came to Melissa Darnell's face.

After a moment she said in a low voice, "Ms. Darnell, not Mrs." Then, because her stubborn mouth would not let it be unsaid no matter what

the cost, she added, “My husband is dead.”

This was no pain that could be assuaged. Dean did not bother with consolations or sympathies, but drew a breath and dug in, waiting. Tearless eyes held on him another moment, then went back to the house. “They’re Satanists, you know,” she commented after clearing her throat.

“So I’ve been told.”

Her eyelashes flicked at the bottle still in his hand. “But you’re not.”

“No. What’re you?”

He said it without any fear of her nature. But the house was still behind him, and Merrill and John were still in it.

She considered him. “I’m undecided,” and there was a Hell of a lot behind those words, too much for him to decipher. Years afterward, when he knew more, he still could not fully unravel it all.

“What do you want?” he asked instead of trying.

Another round of scrutiny commenced, and he held motionless underneath it. The skin of her face was still drawn tight, fighting to contain the flood within. Finally, she turned back to the truck, resting one hand on the open door and looking at him over her shoulder.

“Get in,” she said simply.

Later, much later, Dean could look back on that moment and laugh, cry, scream. But men rarely recognize the turning points of their lives, never guessing how close they come to triumph or doom in the simplest of choices. At the time, he merely paused and then walked around the front of the pickup to the passenger side, keeping a hand on his knife.

She drove a little ways, a few blocks away on a side street and he realized that she had only wanted privacy from the house.

“My husband Jason was a high school teacher.” She drew out a picture from a small folder beside her, fingering a corner with reluctance before handing it over. Dean forced himself not to take a sharp inward breath. The man in the photo had a round face, moustache, and a large smile. Not exceptionally handsome, but he had gentle eyes. Beside him, his brown-haired bride sat oblivious to the

camera, oblivious to anything that moved except for him.

Great grief found its source in great love. In the picture, Melissa Darnell's heart and soul shown on her face as she looked at her husband. Her world began and ended in the space between them.

He raised his eyes and found her watching him. A ghost of her unfriendly smile slid across her lips. "Cute, weren't we? That was last Christmas."

Dean knew better than to respond; he handed the photo back. "What happened?" because she wanted him to ask.

"He was murdered." Flat voice, no emotion. "Beaten, stabbed, and carved."

"*Carved*?"

"Yes," Melissa confirmed, her green eyes inscrutable as she took something else out of the folder and handed it to him. "Carved."

They were crime scene photos, and how she had them Dean didn't want to know. He did know instantly why she had shown him that first personal image: so that he could discern the difference, would see the before and after and understand how painfully that gentle man had died.

His eyes had been gouged out with startling precision that left the eyebrows intact above the empty sockets. A symbol had been carved into the flesh of each cheek, though less accurately than the job done on the eyes; Dean could barely make them out, but a cursory glance at the other photographs showed seven other markings on the back, torso, hands, and feet, as well as a gaping hole in his chest. And his limbs…

His arms and legs had been snapped in a dozen places, twisting around in horrifying angles.

Dean swept them all together, held them in his lap. He knew the markings, knew the ritual. *Calling a demon*, he thought, and shivered. It required two bodies, one for the sacrifice, which would be carved with ritual markings in preparation, and through which the demon would pass in the moment of death. And one body, the demon's caller, who devoured the eyes and heart, completing the possession. *A willing possession, offering up one's body to a demon searching for a host*.

Willing.

He met her eyes and knew that his emotions were not as hidden or controlled. “You think they’re involved?”

“He was a history teacher at North Page High School. Three of your little friends,” and the mocking tone returned, “were in his class. The night that he was murdered, he called home, told me a student in his class had asked him to stay late. Two days later they found him in the woods around the school like *that*.” The smile was gone.

“What did the police say?”

“That no junior-year high school student had the strength,” her demeanor of bitter detachment faltered and the grief returned in a rush, “to break his arms and legs in two dozen places, or rip out his heart without any utensils.”

But a demon could. Dean swallowed, studying the pictures again to buy himself time. “What do you want from me?”

“Well,” she said thickly, “you might try your tests,” she jerked her chin at the bottle balanced on one knee, “on your housemates.”

He stared at her, words ringing in his mind. *I’m undecided*. “You believe in it?”

That eyebrow arched again. “Do you?”

He did. God help him, but he did. “Which housemates?”

“Danielle Ramirez, Kristen Reems, and Merrill Finchley.”

It occurred to Dean in some small corner of his brain that maintained a running sarcastic commentary, no matter how dire or disastrous the straits, that this was the first time he’d ever heard Merrill’s last name.

-o-

Two days later Dean walked away from his job at the gas station with about a thousand dollars. Two hundred went to Bernie, who blinked and shrugged, four went to a repair shop for the scrape on the Impala’s door (over his father’s objections that it was a waste of money, quickly silenced at Dean’s expression). Various living and supply expenses left them with about a hundred bucks. Gun stores didn’t take credit cards.

In the absence of graveyard shifts, Dean spent a week sleeping on the floor of their room. John, sensing the change, rung himself dry and slipped a decent stock of silver bullets into the trunk of the car when it came back with a repaired door.

Merrill watched these preparations with dark eyes. *No strings, unless you want them*, and he asked nothing, clearly expecting nothing. But he still watched.

And when the car was reassembled and repaired, when there was nothing left to do but put themselves and their duffel bags on the front seat, Dean lay awake all night on the bedroom floor, sweating in the Arizona summer heat. There were charms laid on the door and weapons nearby; no matter how comfortable their life had been or how much he drank, John Winchester was a cautious man. He may have noted Dean checking their precautions the past few days, but there was a lot that John noticed and never said anything about.

Dean stared at the ceiling in a secure room, not three feet away from his father, with weapons aplenty around him, and felt dread uncoil itself in his stomach.

He'd hoped to get away clean. He thought of Merrill's eyes, and knew it wasn't going to happen.

If it isn't him, it's one of his best friends, said one voice that, he realized with silent laughter, sounded very much like Sam.

It's not my problem, said a second voice. He wasn't sure who or what it reminded him of.

The hell it isn't! There's a demon somewhere here that has killed one person, and will probably kill again. Screw probably, definitely!

And what the fuck can I do about it? This isn't a possession that I can exorcise. Whoever took this demon into themselves, did it willing. *There's nothing to do but kill the body itself, and never mind that the demon could toss me around with a pinkie, I…I can't* do *that.*

And if I don't, the first voice said, and yes, this was definitely the part of him that belonged to Sam, only he would deliver an ultimatum so stubbornly, *maybe it'll kill Merrill.*

And what if it's Merrill?

The first voice had no answer for that.

When dawn broke, he got up and slipped out the door, closing it quietly behind him.

Either way, it had to be done.

-o-

He took forty bucks and got a decent motel room on the other side of town. John would tear into him for using cash instead of a fake credit card, but Dean didn't care. Either way it went, he needed this to be honest.

It took an hour to completely secure the room with every precaution he knew, and ten minutes for him to realize that that wasn't the way he wanted to do it, and he cleared everything back out again. In the end, it was just him and his Bowie knife that showed up at the gas station.

If it was Merrill, he'd probably be torn to shreds, and on some level Dean preferred that to his other alternative.

Merrill shuffled out the door at noon after a double shift, rubbing his face and scowling. A recent decree from management had outlawed facial piercings, and constantly taking the metal in and out left him with an irritated lip. In retaliation he'd declared war and started stealing from the till.

So when he raised his eyes and saw the Impala waiting for him, the scowl did not disappear. He glared for a few moments, reminding Dean of a sullen gas station attendant that he'd met five weeks ago. Then he marched heavily over and leaned down into the open passenger window.

"Oh, we're doing this again?" he inquired bitterly. "Your dad isn't around, I guess, so it must be okay to fuck guys?" He waited for a return volley, lips twisted. When none came, bit by bit his expression changed. "Dean?"

"Get in."

Merrill obeyed, settling uncertainly into the car seat, his eyes on Dean's face. But he asked no questions, not when Dean drove further than he had to and gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. He walked quietly in front of Dean, shuffling up the steel stairs into the motel room.

As Dean shut the door behind them, Merrill turned and finally broke the silence. “So I guess this is my goodbye present, huh?” he said, and could not keep the bitterness and disappointment hidden any longer.

Dim light played across Merrill’s face, casting half of it in complete shadow. They were barely a foot apart, but the curtains were drawn tight and Dean could barely make him out in the unnatural twilight of a summer noon. The air around them was stifling hot, and thick with the smoke of previous customers. Few sounds came through the window. Dean had specifically requested a room away from the others, where they would hear nothing, and no one would hear them.

“Dean?” Merrill’s voice had just a hint of apprehension in it now. *Why, do I strike you as the serial killer type?*

Dean moved easily around him and across the room in the darkness. It was a familiar environment for him. The lamp beside the bed cast an orange haze, but it would do. He switched it on then turned. “Come here.”

Merrill came instantly, stepping from darkness to light. A young man in loose jeans and a long black T-shirt that Dean recognized on closer inspection as his own. Fragility and strength both shown in his slight frame: after all, he’d made it this far, surviving whatever shit life had thrown at him. The light emphasized the delicacy of his features, made him seem even younger than seventeen.

Fingers slid up across Dean’s face, pulling his lips down to meet others. He closed his hands around slender wrists and stopped the descent just short. Using that grip, he turned the body facing him until Merrill sat down on the bed, looking up with the lamp light shining directly on his face, in his beautiful, confused eyes.

Dean kept one hand entangled with Merrill’s. The other, he slid behind his back. The world spun around him as he realized that yeah, he could probably do this after all.

And that knowledge more than anything else almost broke him.

Finally, he managed to say it. “Christo.”

Nothing happened. Somewhere an especially loud car door slammed shut.

A young forehead creased, uncertain. “What?”

Dean licked dry lips. *No one's that merciful*, he thought wildly, *and if they were, they wouldn't waste it on me*. "Christo."

Merrill stared at him with completely normal eyes. "Dude, did you just call me Chris?"

Something crucial inside Dean wavered, teetering. Without realizing it he'd let go of the Bowie knife and had both hands on Merrill, one on his face and the other twining itself into the collar of his shirt – *my shirt*. Then his gaze slid past him and caught something glinting in the lamp light. A small gold crucifix, a leftover from the original booby-traps, hung just above the door. Through which no demon could pass.

The crucial something truly broke then, some part of him that he hadn't realized was in screaming anguish until the moment that it wasn't anymore. For a few minutes he was barely conscious of anything except that breathing hurt and Merrill kept saying his name in a worried way. And then his breathing and Merrill both got quieter, and it was really stupid to go to sleep, but he hadn't done it in a few days and somehow he had lain down on the bed with Merrill underneath him, their arms wrapped so tight around each other that Dean could feel Merrill's heart against his chest, beating much steadier than his own.

Closing his eyes, he put his face against Merrill's neck and let the darkness take him.

When he woke up, he'd been moved to lie lengthwise with the bed, his shirt and shoes lay neatly on the floor, the digital clock beside the bed read 5:15 PM, and Merrill sat beside him with the Bowie knife.

He waited for instincts and alarm bells, but none came. They looked at one another in the near darkness over the blade balanced across Merrill's hands.

"Guess it's a little late to start asking questions now, huh?" Merrill whispered.

Dean loved him, in that moment. Loved him completely and sat up. The knife buried itself halfway in the wall where he threw it. Really, sane people should have been afraid of that, should have run screaming for the hills. Merrill, thankfully, was a self-destructive former rentboy and when Dean pushed him back on the bed and practically dove on top, Merrill arched to let him strip the shirt – *my shirt* – over his head.

If, if, if. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, and later Dean could not help but wonder. *If I'd grabbed him then, if we'd gotten into the car and started driving right away instead of fucking around…*

But then he probably would have had to choose one to live and one to die, and that he *knew* he couldn't do. Except that he probably could, and just didn't know it yet.

At the time he only lost himself in Merrill's body. And Merrill, not understanding but not questioning, curled hands, lips, and legs around him, holding him together like he knew how close Dean was to breaking apart.

Later, with Merrill's head pillowed on his arm and Dean's other arm wrapped around him from behind and their legs tangled up, Dean said into his ear, "I want you to come with me."

The body underneath his arm changed, listening. "With us," Dean amended, "me and my dad."

Merrill rolled onto his back, eyebrows drawn together, searching. "And he's okay with that? He's not going to try to shoot me or something?"

Dean laughed despite himself. He hadn't really thought it through before speaking, but giddy hope rose up out of him suddenly. Maybe, maybe they could get away clean after all, the three of them. He could get Merrill someplace safe, then regroup with Dad, swing back around and smoke this bitch out. "Yeah," he replied, "yeah, he'll be okay with it, eventually. And if he's not, fuck 'im, I'll tie him up and make him watch public service announcements until he achieves a new level of tolerance. I want you to come with me."

Answering hope rose in Merrill's face, and his lips turned upward into the largest smile Dean had ever seen there. "Okay."

-o-

Dean fairly flew through town, taking corners faster than they needed to. But they got back to the house in once piece, though Merrill's eyes were pretty big by the time they did. "Whoa," he said as they finally pulled into the driveway.

Dean paused. "You sure you want to do this? It's just - - there's a lot of stuff you don't know. About me, about all of this." Which was a stupid thing to say, there was no way he was going to let Merrill stay here

with a demon on the loose, he'd tie him to the hood of the car if he had to.

"Um, yeah, I gathered that." Merrill smiled crookedly. "Well, are you gonna tell me some of it?"

Dean slid across the car seat and caught Merrill's lips with his own, kissing him deeply. At the same time he slid one hand to the glove compartment, popping it open and transferring the Glock hidden inside to the back of his pants before ending the kiss. Merrill stared at him, dazed and oblivious. Dean smiled a quick, small smile. "Some of it. Stay here, I'll be right back."

It was almost 8 o'clock; Bernie would be home, and the door was unlocked. Dean slid inside, pausing to listen. To his left, a doorway opened into the living room, which in turn branched into the kitchen. Faint clinks of silverware and dishes came from the last room. He moved slowly down the hall toward the second opening, one hand curled over the gun handle.

Kristen glanced up as Dean moved into the doorway, then went back to washing dishes. "Hello, Dean," she greeted.

"Hey, Kristen." Dean leaned against the door frame, keeping his arm out of view. "Is my dad upstairs?" Kristen nodded, drying a cup. "Thanks."

And it was that close, that close to all three making it away. Because as he relaxed his grip on the gun and pulled his shirt down to hide it, Dean looked up and saw a single bullet hole in the wall. Heard the distant thump, smelled the gasoline.

He turned slowly, looking back through the kitchen doorway. "Christo," he whispered.

Kristen's hands stilled on the dishes damp with soap and water. Her eyes when she raised them were inky black, and a huge smile spread over her face. "Hello, Dean." It was the second worst sound Dean had ever heard.

Two seconds later, Dean heard the worst. "Dean?" He turned, stomach dropping. Merrill stood by the open front door, framed by light. "Dean?"

"No," he said, and pulled out the Glock.

Kristen's hand closed around his wrist as he raised the gun, snapping it backwards like a breadstick. Pain lanced up his arm and Dean screamed. Distantly he heard Merrill cry out in horror and shock, and that brought him back around in a hurry. "*RUN*," Dean shouted, his other hand scrambling behind his back for the knife. "Run, Merrill, get out…"

But then Devin stepped out of the shadows with black eyes and closed his fingers around Merrill's neck. Simultaneously, Kristen's fist hit Dean square in the chest and he had no breath left to scream.

-o-

It hurt to breathe, and he could feel ribs twinge every time he moved. Not that he could move very much, tied up like he was. He could, however, see Merrill lying next to him. Dean knew, but he made himself look anyway.

Beaten, stabbed, and carved, and she wasn't joking. Merrill's body lay in a wide pool of his own blood, full of holes and butchery. Dean squeezed his eyes shut, his stomach churning. The image stayed with him, painted against the backs of his eyelids. *Merrill*, he thought miserably. *I wanted you to come with me, and you did. And look what it got you.*

"He's awake," said a harsh voice above him.

Rough hands seized him and rolled him onto his back. He hissed in agony and the world seemed fuzzy when he opened his eyes, weaving for a moment until he realized that it was firelight and not the world that was dancing. He lay with dusty earth beneath him and a wide starlit sky above. The heat of a nearby fire warmed the already-sweltering June air.

Someone moved to stand over him. Dean peered through the moving shadows up into Kristen Reems' face.

"Hello, Dean," she said again in a voice both her own and something else. "You're a long way from North Carolina."

It took a moment to connect in Dean's foggy brain. "You."

"Me. I owe you one from the laundromat, Dean. Did you think I would forget you or your daddy?"

Panic overrode pain and grief. "Where is he?"

“Burning alive,” the Barbas demon reported cheerfully. She raised one foot and laid it on his chest, making spots dance in Dean’s vision. “He put up quite a fight, locked himself in his protected little tower. We wounded him pretty badly, though, and set the house on fire.” The firelight shadows made her teeth look like fangs. “We wanted to use him as a sacrifice for to raise Bernie’s demon, but then you two sweethearts showed up,” she jerked a chin past him at Merrill’s body, “and we didn’t think it worth the effort. If you’d have come a little earlier, we might have had some fun, made you choose between the two of them.”

Dean fought to fill his lungs despite the pressure of her foot. “Who’s we?” he gasped.

She laughed unpleasantly and stepped away. Dean drew in a relieved breath, but forgot it in the next instant as she pulled him upright.

A bonfire raged in the center of an empty space among the low-lying Arizona brush. Lines surrounded it, drawn in the dirt. He knew without trying to trace their shape that it was a pentagram. At its peaks stood Danielle and Bernie, who stared back at him with black eyes.

And Dean knew he was going to die.

Three. Three demons, all with willing hosts.

“Four, actually,” Kristen’s voice purred in his ear. “Devin is off hunting.”

A familiar cold feeling poured through Dean’s veins as her voice filled his mind. Behind him lay Merrill’s body, who he’d led to death. Somewhere, his father was burning. *Sam*, he thought hopelessly, *you had the right idea in leaving*. And strangely, that thought gave him comfort. He was going to die, Dad might already be dead, but Sam was safe. Somehow that seemed right, just like he’d always imagined it would end.

He’d also imagined that he’d go down swinging, though, and from the looks of things, he’d better get started. “What,” he wheezed, “all of this for little old me?”

Kristen rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t flatter yourself.” She shoved him sideways and Dean barely had time to tense his muscles before he hit the ground. Despite his best efforts, he held on to consciousness only by his fingernails. The Barbas demon crouched beside him. He focused

on her and at the same time took stock of his body. His wrists and ankles were bound with duct tape, and he began twisting, trying to loosen his hands. It was pure agony for his broken wrist, but the pain cleared his head and he fought to keep it off his face as she spoke.

“I didn’t follow you here. This little idiot,” she gestured at herself, sneering, “summoned me with her teacher’s body last Christmas. She was a true believer… imagined herself a princess of hell instead of another slave.” She leaned over him, tracing a finger down his face. “I think sometimes that Fate has a more twisted sense of humor than the Devil. I found the other four halfwits months ago, had them all lined up like lambs to the slaughter.” Delighted mockery filled her voice. “And in the door you walked, all tan and beautiful.”

Hands slid over Dean’s chest and he shuddered. “Must have scared the shit out of you,” he spat defiantly.

Laughter rose up out of her throat. “For a moment, yes. But you looked right through me, didn’t you, Dean? Didn’t even see me, not for a whole month. And I finished what I started.”

The others had come up to flank her, grinning down at him. Bernie had a bloody mouth, and Dean tasted bile in the back of his throat.

“And like good lambs, they marched to their slaughter.” Kristen stood up beside the other two, keeping her eyes on Dean. “‘Read this, Bernie,’ ‘check out this cool incantation, Danielle.’ Oh, they fought, once they realized that it wasn’t all just dress-up and Sharpie markers.” She leaned languidly against Bernie’s chest, reaching out a hand to stroke Danielle’s cheek. “But you know how… *persuasive* I can be. All it took was one. Soon we’ll have five, and once we have that,” she waved a hand at the clearing, “we’ll raise a hundred more.”

Dean lay still underneath their eyes. “Five?” he asked, even though he knew already. The cold wrapped itself around him, stroking his skin until he could feel nothing else.

“Yes.” Her black eyes glittered in the darkness. “And since I know you’d never say the words willingly, I guess you get to be the sacrifice.”

“Christo,” Dean spat desperately as his hands popped free. He spun on the ground, kicking out with both legs, and hit Danielle’s knee as she recoiled from the word. She went down with a satisfying thud, and Dean whipped around, snaking his good arm out.

The Barbas demon caught it. “No,” she said coolly, her mouth at his ear, “not this time,” and snapped his wrist.

Dean screamed a second time, and then he was lifted and thrown like a stick. Fractured bones cried out at the rough landing and he fought for breath, seeing black close in on his vision.

As he sank into it, he heard Kristen say, “Now prepare him.”

He awoke a few moments later to screaming, and thought for a second that it was Merrill, or his father, or Sam. Then the white-hot pain came again, and he knew they were cutting him, slicing the symbols into the naked skin of his back. He thrashed desperately, but instantly an invisible force pinned him down flat, driving his face into the dirt.

“Shhhh, Dean,” the Barbas demon whispered into his ear, laughing, “it’ll be over soon. Then I’ll make your skin into a nice belt.”

Dean opened his mouth, struggling to invoke the name of God, a prayer, or just to spit at them. But even that power seemed to have left him. He squeezed his eyes shut as the knife cut him again, moaning behind clenched teeth.

Sam, he thought as he slipped back into merciful oblivion, *I don’t think I’m going down swinging*.

-o-

“Wake up, Dean. I want you awake for this.”

The voice slithered into his ears, pulling him into unwilling consciousness. Fire danced in front of his eyes, but cold filled him. Every inch of his body swam with ice or pain. *Maybe this is death.*

Someone laughed. “No, not yet. But soon.”

Fingers wound in his hair and pulled his head up. Gasping as various injuries protested the sudden movement, Dean opened his eyes. They’d finished their work. He could feel them everywhere, the shallow cuts, carved into his skin. The wounds opened and closed with every breath.

Crouched over him, the Barbas demon smiled. “Aren’t you beautiful,” she purred. “Aren’t you just *beautiful*.” Her teeth shone like naked bones.

The world wavered and legs stood beside her. “He’s back,” reported a disembodied voice. Danielle, who Dean had taught how to deal cards from the bottom of the deck. “He’s got her.”

The face before him twisted upward, full of dead children and raped women. Then it rose and moved beside him, lifting his limp body easily. “Bring her here,” it whispered, low and guttural, as hands closed around his throat. Dean squeezed his eyes shut, struggling to breathe, until a scuffle of movement and a low cry made him open them.

A few feet away, Melissa Darnell crouched in the dirt where Devin had just thrown her, and stared back with wide green eyes.

Dean gave a cry of protest that came out a croak. The hand tightened at his throat and nails dug into his flesh. “Oh, you remember *Mrs.* Darnell, don’t you, Dean? And Melissa, you remember Mr. Winchester? And you remember *Mr.* Darnell, both of you… remember how he died, how painful it must have been?”

A look crossed the upturned face, the memory of nameless, endless grief.

Dean couldn’t breathe. He flailed weakly, raising twisted, helpless hands on broken wrists. The world slowly shrank around him until he sensed nothing but the pain of his lungs and the sound of that hateful voice. It went on, low and mellifluous.

“You’re both going to die. You’re going to die here, and there’s nothing either of you can do to stop it. But there’s one thing you *can* do, Melissa.” The voice changed, becoming almost kindly. “You can help Dean die. You can end his pain, and he’s in a lot of it, trust me. But you can make it happen faster, and make sure that no one has to die like your husband did. And all you have to do is say what we tell you to say.”

Every gasping breath now was a torturous fight, and Dean thought, *She’ll do it, she’ll say it.* Any sane, merciful person would, anyone with a scrap of kindness left to them would do it. He thought of John, who was stronger and probably got a few good hits in before the end. He thought of Sam, so far away. He thought of his mother, who might be waiting for him.

Dean waited to die.

And then Melissa Darnell began to laugh.

The sound rose up through the poisoned honey spun by the Barbas demon. It rose and rose across the flat earth until the night sky echoed it back. It was a high, wild laugh, utterly devoid of sanity, mercy, or kindness.

When it ended, a space of silence blossomed, as if the world took one breath and held it.

On the other side of the veil over his eyes, a voice spoke. Full of cold nights, cigarette smoke, and implacable hatred. “You amateurs.”

One of the other demons – *Bernie* – started to scream, and kept screaming. Over the sound, Danielle shouted in terror, “Oh fuck me, fuck *me*… it’s *her!*”

The hand at his throat disappeared and Dean dropped to the ground, gasping. Something passed above him and he could swear he heard the Earth itself creak with the force of its movement. The bonfire went out like a candle.

In the darkness, Dean gulped breath into his body like a diver breaking the surface, huddled against the dirt as dust swirled around him. The chill cast by the Barbas demon gave way an Arizona summer night, and warmth returned to his frozen limbs. Dean tried moving his fingers into something resembling a fist and failed. Both wrists broken, then, and probably his ribs, too. Add whatever blood he’d already lost from all the cutting they’d done on him, and he was well and truly fucked if anything came at him.

“Mastema,” said a voice in the dark. Dean twisted, scooting away from the noise instinctively. It was the Barbas demon, but nothing like before. It sounded… *scared.* “Mastema,” it said again, and shook. “Forgive us. We did not know.”

Laughter rose again, from somewhere off in the dark. “You’re asking *me* for forgiveness?” inquired a second voice, amused and pitiless. “Of all creatures in Heaven, Earth, and Hell, you ask *me* to forgive?”

“We did not know it was you!” Danielle’s voice pleaded from nearby and Dean moved away from her, too, crawling blind, groping across the ground. “If we had known, we would never, never…” she trailed off piteously.

“Oh, I’m not pissed about tonight, my dears. It was pretty entertaining, actually. But you should not have killed Jason Darnell.”

Dean froze in his slow escape, listening. Melissa Darnell or whatever she was had drawn closer, and grief throbbed beneath her snarl. An image rose in his mind's eye, the photograph of a man and the woman who loved him. *Great grief found its source in great love… and so did great hatred.*

"If you had known," she went on, her voice thick, "you would never have dared to touch him." She paused, and the world took another breath. Then their sentence rang clear and cold. "But you didn't. And you did."

Another rush of movement knocked Dean flat on his stomach and somewhere to the right Danielle shrieked. There was an awful noise that sounded a lot like tearing flesh.

Dean broke and ran, or ran as best he could, staggering to his feet and stumbling through the wild brush. He barely got thirty feet before his ribs brought him down.

Among dry earth and bracken, Dean curled up into a ball and closed his eyes to the tortured wails of demons.

-o-

"Hold still, Dean," Sam whispered in his ear as he wrapped gauze around Dean's hand. He was fourteen, and the last of hero worship still glimmered in his eyes as he looked at his older brother.

Dean reached out with his other hand to push back Sam's hair – it was always too long in front, he kept bugging Sam about it – but his fingers were covered in blood and when he looked at his hand, something ugly and hateful had been cut in the palm.

Sam frowned, reaching for the wound, but Dean pulled it back. He'd seen the blood turn black, become poisonous. "No," he said, shaking his head and drawing away, "no, you need to leave again, Sam, it's not safe. I'm not safe."

His little brother's frown deepened, but with concern, not anger. He reached out and touched Dean's face, gentle and soothing.

The hands were too small. So were the eyes, when he looked again, and beyond the shaggy head he saw desert instead of a hotel room. But strangely it didn't seem to matter. Dean let his head fall against a small shoulder.

“It’s been lonely out here, Sammy,” he murmured, eyelids heavy. “It’s been real lonely.”

-o-

His father hadn’t burned alive. Dean figured that out pretty quickly when he woke up in a Flagstaff hospital three days later and John Winchester sat beside his bed, haggard and wrapped in his own bandages. Firefighters found him sprawled on the lawn outside the house, coughing and bleeding. Drawn in the dirt around him they’d also found a series of strange symbols. Circles within circles, turning in on themselves, nothing like those jagged designs cut into the flesh of several victims found in a nearby hotel.

They discovered similar designs surrounding Dean in the woods a few hours later, along with strange-smelling rags pressed against the wounds on his face, hands, and torso. Doctors sniffed them doubtfully, worried about infection; but the wounds had closed up remarkably well. His ribs were still pretty jacked up, though, and he had splints on both wrists. Bedrest, they prescribed cheerfully.

Police came and went. John handled most of it; Dean didn’t have to work too hard in his portrayal of a deeply traumatized survivor. Of those brief interviews, he gleaned that there wouldn’t be much of an investigation. The case got some attention from the local media, another example of misspent youth and the myth of psycho knife-wielding Satanists. It would all be swept aside as a cautionary tale. The victims’ families gave tearful testimony to the good lives their loved ones had led, and had joint funerals, holding hands.

No one claimed what little remained of the Satanists, as if a disease clung to them. Five bodies had been recovered from around the bonfire, or pieces thereof. Only one body remained relatively whole; the rest had been ripped to shreds and scattered – by animal scavengers, the authorities were quick to add. They rested in their various states in the Page city morgue until John drove the long way back to Page and claimed four of them. He pawned some guns and his wedding ring – *his wedding ring* – to buy plots in a local graveyard. Dean had no more illusions about what John did or did not know about his son, and loved his father more than life.

On the last day of his stay in the hospital, a quiet young police officer came with a tape. A 911 call, from the “weirdest little voice I’ve ever heard,” he explained. “It came about 20 minutes after midnight… only reason we found you so quick,” he added to Dean.

The tape was short. "*911, what's your emergency?*"

The voice that answered made even John's eyebrows go up. It was something between a squeak and a croak, and spoke so rapidly that the words ran together. "*There's a guy that needs help right now. Seven and three-quarter miles due northeast of the 98-20 junction three miles south of Kaibito creek beneath the burned-out pine tree I relit the fire to guide you he's near it pleasehurryheneedshelprightnow*."

The click of a hang up followed, and the police officer cut off the 911 operator's bewildered response. "Anyone you recognize?"

Dean thought of a strange whisper from Sam's lips and hands that were too small. The echo of a feverish dream. "Naw, no one I know."

The officer shrugged, disappointed. "Call came from a pay phone near the Page Municipal Airport. It's not distorted, as far as we can tell." When neither of the Winchester faces showed anything, he pulled out photographs from a briefcase. For a moment, Dean tensed, flinching away; his nightmares already swam with the memory of one body. But the photos showed nothing more than swirls in dirt.

"They're Anasazi signs," the officer went on, pointing. "Some professor at Arizona State identified them as protection symbols. Supposedly they invoke the natural spirits, call on them to protect someone against harm." He looked back and forth between them and his smile slipped. "Guess you've got somebody watching out for you," he finished lamely.

The next morning John turned the car north. They hadn't discussed their destination, but he wordlessly directed the Impala down the 150-mile stretch of highway he'd driven three times in the last week. And just as wordlessly, he waited beside the car as Dean heaved himself out and trudged up the hill, the casts around his wrists clutched protectively close.

They lay in a neat row, the four of them. Simple square plots with temporary white markers, all a father's love could buy. *Danielle Ramirez, Devin Crosby, Bernard Lawson, Merrill Finchley*; nothing else but their names and dates, and not one of them had been older than twenty.

A strong wind had picked up in the last week, and it blew among the old wooden crosses from lives and deaths long ago, whistling through cracks in a dilapidated fence surrounding the graveyard. Beyond, the earth stretched out in an endless sea of brown, interrupted by mesas

and the small constructions of man.

He hadn't missed the blue pickup parked at the bottom of the hill.

"They buried Jason over by the rose bushes," she said behind him. "He liked flowers a lot more than I ever did." After Dean gave no reply, she moved to stand next to him, looking down at the graves.

The shadows cast by gravestones had lengthened into late afternoon. Dean finally stirred and looked at her. Gone was the middle-aged ranch wife. Lines of age had vanished, and the long brown hair was pulled back into a tight, coiling braid. But something more fundamental had been pulled away like the sheath of a knife, and the cold steel he'd seen in her eyes shown clear in every line of her face and body.

"What are you?" Dean asked, and didn't care that his voice sounded broken even to his own ears.

She laughed softly, nothing like before. "I'm undecided," she replied for the second (but not the last) time, looking out over the empty landscape before meeting his eyes. "I'm an outcast, with no allies and many enemies. I am a servant of God, and I am a demon." She shrugged, lifting one corner of her mouth. "There aren't names for what I am, because I'm the only one."

"The others called you Mastema."

She blinked and looked back at the view. "One name. An old man gave it to me before people lived in this land."

"And what," Dean asked, wiping at his face, "was Melissa Darnell?"

Green eyes stared at the horizon, seeking and not finding. "What I wish I still was." Her gaze dropped to the graves before her. "I have loved two things in my life, Dean Winchester. One was God, and the other is buried underneath roses." Steel wavered and broke before that same crushing grief.

After a long moment, he asked, "Did he know?"

She swallowed, looking away, then back with a touch of anger in her damp eyes. "No. Maybe, I don't know. I was tired and lonely and he never asked questions that he should have. So I didn't exactly volunteer the information. I think you can understand that arrangement perfectly well."

Dean recoiled and felt an answering anger rise. “You didn’t exactly volunteer information with me either, if I recall.” One half of his brain was screaming at him, reminding him of what had happened to three of the bodies beneath his feet when this woman - *demon, thingy* – got pissed. “What was I, your bait?”

“No,” she snapped, eyes flashing. “I thought you would have the good sense to get the Hell out of town and not look back.”

“Oh, I’ve done that before, trust me,” Dean spat. “It worked out great. Wound up with a demon’s vendetta against me and a dead girl’s blood on my hands.”

“Well, technically, it was your father who killed her,” she retorted.

It took two seconds for him to understand, and two more for him to swing at her with everything he had, which wasn’t much and he probably did more damage to himself than her. She dropped to the overturned ground beside Devin’s grave, but pain erupted in Dean’s right wrist, and he doubled over clutching it. She was back on her feet in an instant, the cold steel of a raised blade. “If you were any other living creature,” she said from between her teeth, “I would *end* you.”

“Ditto,” Dean hissed.

She saw the expression on his face and confusion overrode rage. “You didn’t want to know?”

“*No*.” Dean shouted, then caught himself and lowered his voice. “Fuck you,” but just like that, his anger went out of him and he turned away. “Fuck you. I’ve loved four people in my life. Two are dead, one left me, and the other…” *Is a murderer*. “I didn’t want to know, I didn’t want to know…”

Apparently she decided not to rip him apart, because they stood in silence. Dean thought of Merrill and closed his eyes.

Finally she said, “I’m sorry.” When he gave no response, she murmured, “See you around, Dean Winchester.” The scuff of boots against gravel marked her departure, but Dean did not open his eyes.

He stood over a grave on the solitary hill until the shadows lengthened and color touched the sky. Then it was time to go down the hill to his father, who had killed an innocent girl on the other side of the continent, and who Dean loved with the desperation of a drowning man.

And that was the end of the 418th day.

Chapter 4: The 572nd Day: Blood And Water

The 572nd Day: Blood and Water

Several thousand miles and innumerable shadows stretched between that meeting and their next. The Impala went through two sets of tires, though they never touched Arizona pavement: John seemed to understand that the Southwestern states were off-limits for a while. So they wound their way East, tangled with a poltergeist in Oklahoma, chopped down a bunch of living trees in the Appalachian Mountains, swung by South Carolina to torch a demon dog. Then Dean casually offered to drive through the night, and made it border-to-border of North Carolina without stopping, his father asleep beside him and the memory of a girl's blood in his mind.

Some states would have to stay off limits.

His wrists healed well, though the right one still popped occasionally. He'd probably never be the same fighter that he was before: he'd always favor that arm. The other scars faded too, except for one line of white flesh curving under his shoulder blades where the knife had cut deep. For weeks after Arizona, Dean had to enter and exit the bathroom at a dead run, keeping his face averted from the mirror which was always – *fucking always* – a Berlin Wall between the toilet and the door. They rented a little apartment in Durango Colorado close enough to Arizona for John and far enough away for Dean. John got a temp job at the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, doing some kind of hard labor that brought him through the door at a stagger.

Dean didn't work. He avoided people like he avoided mirrors; if he went out at all, he pulled a hood low over his face. He'd only looked once into the warped bathroom mirror of their tiny bare room. Red slashes carved into pale skin, and he dry-heaved an empty stomach into the toilet.

Mostly he slept, or didn't sleep, curled up on a bare mattress covered with mystery stains. The grey room faded, but not deep enough for dreams. If he ever slipped that low into the pool, Merrill would be waiting for him. Or sometimes the girl in North Carolina, or Sam, or a woman with blonde hair and a fuzzy face whom he knew by her dream-smell as his mother.

Once or twice he dreamed of a night sky in which the stars swirled in

strange circles, turning in on themselves in strangefamiliar designs, and a low croakingsqueaking voice whispered into his ear. Those dreams held him until morning, tiny islands in the ocean.

After four weeks, John had enough money to retrieve his wedding ring from the pawn shop in Page. He stood in the doorway looking at Dean, and Dean looked past him into the beautiful mountain summer. “I’ll be fine,” he said, and after a moment the door closed, shutting out all that glorious light.

For once, John Winchester heard the lie. Dean didn’t know how his father made it there and back in less than 15 hours, but it was good thing he did. Sometime in the interim, Dean wound up in the bathroom, holding a knife to his cheek where the symbols had all but disappeared under new pink skin. The fine blade’s tip drew tiny beads of blood, barely breaking the surface, and Dean thought, *They’re fading too fast. They shouldn’t, I should be scarred. Cuts like that, they scar, so that you don’t forget.* Then something hit a window and his hand flipped its hold automatically. Nothing but night stared back innocently when he looked out the door, and three hours of swirling, star-filled dreams later, Dean opened his eyes to the sound of his father’s key in the lock.

They stayed in Durango until Dean’s body completed its semi-miraculous healing. Then the road rose up and swallowed them. Wyoming, Oklahoma, Virginia, South Carolina, upstate New York.

And in New York mutilated bodies drifted ashore on the inland beaches of Lake Ontario.

Dean knew they’d been taking easy jobs lately. No werewolves or demon possessions. So despite his face in mirrors and the nightmares (or maybe because of them), he scanned the newspaper stories with relief. Claws, no question, and big ones. The victims were mostly fishermen, only one survivor who the police kept tightly under wraps. But people along the shore whispered of howling in the dark and old legends.

“Nasty thing,” John said around a mouthful of eggs and signaled to the waitress. “It’s been here a long time, knows the lay of the land.”

Dean nodded, feeling a familiar prickle along his back. Something deadly that deserved some deadliness back.

-o-

Sackets Harbor Police Department stood against the empty water of Black River Bay, an inlet of Lake Ontario. The last gasp of land where trees bent under constant wind. Dean secretly disliked oceans, or any other large bodies of water. At heart he was a Midwestern boy, landlocked and bound to roads for direction. Even looking at waves made him uneasy, so he focused his attention on the square building down the hill and took another sip of coffee.

Leaves dusted the Impala's hood, and Dean drew his coat tighter against the autumn chill. Mid-October, and they were working with a deadline. November 2nd loomed, when Dad's internal demons ate him alive and spit him back out for Dean to clean up. A proud, two-decade tradition, one that Dean had no doubt his father would uphold. Whatever nasty thing lurking in the endless water, it had better be prepared to resolve itself in a timely fashion.

He'd been mid-sip on the coffee when he saw her standing across the street, and nearly choked.

She stood with her arms folded across her chest, head bent to one side. A relaxed pose, almost slouching. Coupled with a sharp jacket and French rolls in her hair, she looked like some rich-bitch WASP in town for a jaunt on her stockbroker's yacht. Except for her eyes. *Those goddamned eyes*. Forty feet away and he could see the laser glare. She didn't come any closer, but turned and moved away down the street.

Dean's eyes followed and then slid past her. John was trudging up the hill towards the car, directly along her line of descent. Dean's hands reached for weapons and the door handle… but then relaxed, as if they knew better.

One moving figure went up steadily, oblivious, and the other went down, passed, paused, turned slightly… and then went on. Validated, Dean's fingers curled again around the coffee cup, covering for him as the passenger door opened. "They're keeping him isolated," John grunted as he dropped inside, plucking a second coffee cup from its cardboard container on the seat between them. Fake glasses adorned his face and Dean thought distractedly of Clark Kent. "They don't much like reporters, either." He glanced at his son, and paused. "You okay? You look kinda pale."

If Sam and Dean spoke through echoes, John Winchester communicated by omission. He never said the word "Arizona," and he had never asked this particular question in any of the long weeks *after*, when his son's face looked like a horror movie and Dean spent half his

nights screaming. Not asking then, he'd silently spoken of fear and pleading; asking it now, he spoke of hope and healing. John would never ask a question like that, unless he was fairly certain that the answer was *yes*.

"Yes," Dean responded, his eyes staring through the windshield, descending, descending... "You couldn't get to him at all?"

"Naw," John huffed, peeling off the false glasses with one hand and tossing them on the dashboard. "Gave twenty to a secretary… she said he's been pretty twitchy, doesn't want any visitors. Won't even see his own family, keeps screaming at them to get out." Steam from his coffee cup drifted up around his face as he blew on the brown liquid. "Whatever the man saw, it's got him terrified."

Down the hill, she crossed the street in front of the police station, passed up the stairs and through the glass doors. He could swear that she turned briefly, a flash of pale skin tilted upward. *He's got a lot more to worry about now*, and Dean should be turning right around to his father and informing him that a demon just made a move on their only lead.

The keys felt cold against Dean's fingers as he turned them in the ignition. "So, the docks?"

-o-

Three hours later Dean almost tore his own head off when breaking news reported a disturbance at the Sackets Harbor Police Department. One officer dead, six wounded, and his fingernails left half-moon wounds in his palms until surveillance tapes showed Mark Dobbs, the lone survivor of a mysterious fishing boat incident, marching through the halls with bloody hands.

John watched the television with narrow eyes. "Shapeshifter."

Dean found his voice. "Near water. Selkie?"

"Claw marks don't match," and John was already moving, lifting metal that glinted with promises of retribution. "You done with the salt?"

The prickle along Dean's back returned, spreading outward to his fingertips as they rolled packets of rock salt like cigarettes. Invisibly, the last bolt slid into place: he was bruised and scarred, and faces still swam through his dreams, but he was moving again. Moving fast

beside his father, who was alive and had never left him. Be damned to the rest.

They circled around the police station, Dean in the car trolling the back alleys for a trail, and John on foot working his Clark Kent identity. Dean would have preferred to trade their roles: the narrow streets sloped at strange angles as water pulled inexorably at land, tugging hills downward toward the black depths. No matter which way he turned, Dean found himself facing the harbor and that endless, changing mass beyond.

So when he pulled up to a stop sign and the passenger door opened, Dean almost welcomed it. No, scratch that, he fucking embraced it.

“I wondered if you’d hold that punch against me,” he said as the door shut again and he pulled away, turning right.

Her eyebrow arched. “Didja think I would?” She’d affected a Bronx accent, and he smiled faintly.

It wasn’t really a question. He knew, and she knew. “Did you see it?”

Her expression darkened. “No. Fucker sniffed me out before I could get close. It’s a Nuckalavee, 90% positive,” she went on, eyes sliding down dark side streets as they passed.

Dean frowned. “So far from the ocean? They hate fresh water, can’t pass through it, not even in a boat.” And as soon as the words were out of his mouth, it clicked. He chuckled and shook his head. “But it’s got no problem in the air.”

“Rescue airlift.” Her voice held the faintest hint of approval. “It’s probably been on some tiny island out in the lake for a long time. Sends fishermen home in shreds… but it can never get off. Not until man invented the helicopter.” She sat back against the leather; anyone else in the same position, he’d call it lounging. But her body… she held it in a certain way. Ready to move. Never relenting, never relaxed.

Dean nodded, his mind moving fast through the logic. He wondered for a half second if she felt as much relieved pleasure as he did to be back out here, in the deadly night. “So it stands on the shore, shapeshifts to a naked Pam Anderson or something. Fishermen come ashore, it kills them, sets off a flare. Takes one of the fishermen’s forms and waits for the rescue helicopter to bring it across the water.”

“I always preferred Jennifer McCarthy to Pam Anderson myself.”

That took a whole three seconds to register, and then he looked over at her with his eyebrows in his hairline. A wide, wicked grin split her face, and yeah, she enjoyed this a lot. Dean matched her rattlesnake grin, more out of competition than amusement, and refocused on the road. “Doesn’t explain how it got on the island in the first place.”

“*There are stranger things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy*,” and didn’t that just bring his eyebrows right back up. She gave a bark of laughter. “It wasn’t always fresh,” she said, her chin jerking to indicate the looming water. “Was a time when all of this was saltwater. There could have been a whole tribe of Nuckalavees out there, trapped on a shrinking piece of land. Maybe they still are.”

“For 10,000 years?”

“Stranger things, Dean. When you’ve lived as long as I have, 10,000 years doesn’t seem all that extraordinary.”

Silence fell in the car between them. Rain began to drip outside, and Dean switched on the windshield wipers. They thwapped languidly from side to side, gliding over the slick surface. His eyes following their movement, Dean said, “Any guess how rain affects a Nuckalavee? From one hunter to another.”

The last part was completely unnecessary… actually, all of it. He’d bet good money that even small puddles of fresh water would hedge in their quarry. Wipe away any trail, but contain its movements. He knew and she knew. “You’ve been doin’ your homework,” she commented in a neutral tone.

He had. It alone had driven him out of that tiny apartment in Durango when his face still drew wide eyes of shock and pity. In the farthest corner of a library on a quiet Sunday morning, he’d hunched over a computer screen and found her.

Mastema, also called Mastima, Mastim. A demon mentioned in the Book of Jubilees and a Zadokite fragment. Foremost among a tenth of the demonic host who turned from Satan and agreed to live on Earth in human form as servants of God, though this portrayal is not always consistent: at times Mastema is presented as the incarnate of evil who leads mankind astray. The tester of humans with God's permission, who records all sins and will denounce the wicked on Judgment Day. The prosecutor. The punisher. The

hunter.

“I know enough to be nervous.” He felt that same sideways gaze on his face and stared out the windshield at a red traffic light, his hands a little tight on the wheel.

But then she murmured, “Relax, Dean, I ain’t going after Daddy,” and he did relax. She smiled, her familiar unpleasant smirk. “You’re not worried that I’m here for you?”

The thought had occurred to him, and it occurred again. A flash escaped the locked door, sliding through the concrete, steel, wood, and barbed wire he’d erected around the memory. It slid through the keyhole and danced across his brain, filling him for a moment with the image of a body, full of bloody holes, flickering in firelight. When Dean came back to himself, the traffic light had turned green. Shadows and illumination moved across Mastema’s face, and she did not smile anymore.

“If you were,” he said, “I would deserve it.”

Something twisted under her skin and she glared at him. He met her eyes, neither offering nor denying. The doorways in his mind all shut tight again; it could not, would not leave him. But at least nothing else would get in.

Mastema shook her head once, angrily. She did it while turning away, though, so the gesture seemed more directed at the dark world beyond the windshield than at him. The light switched to yellow, then red, and she opened the door, stepping out into the rain. At the last possible second she turned and laid a sudden grip on the car door, leaning down with hair stringing wet into her face.

“You’re right to worry,” she told him in a low, clipped voice. “Watch out for Daddy, Dean. It won’t come from me… but watch out for Daddy.”

Dean’s insides twisted and his knuckles on the wheel returned to white. “So, what… you’re the protector of man now, too?”

Mastema laughed, so soft he might have missed it, if only he hadn’t known her on some cosmic spiritual psycho-fuck level. “I’m undecided,” she said, again, and shut the car door.

-o-

Dean drove a lot faster than necessary past the desecrated police station, drawing glares from reporters and rubbernecks huddled beneath umbrellas. But he found his father at their designated meeting place, standing in front of the Sackets Harbor Brewing Company. For a moment, Mastema's voice faded from Dean's ears.

But John stood with his back to the road and his gaze out over the water. He did not turn as the Impala drew up nearby, and rain fell on his broad shoulders unnoticed. Dean practically threw open his door. "Dad?" he asked, hoping that the now-driving rain hid the high note of fear. Broad shoulders tipped sideways, turned, and went still again. John faced him in the darkness, just a half beat too long, just half a beat. Dean would not have noticed it; and even if he had, his first thought would have logically gone to their shapesifting prey, or possession.

Now they turned to long-overdue punishment, and Dean gripped the steering wheel when John trailed off in the middle of a sentence and stared with wide, distracted eyes into the night.

-o-

For a foggy, half-awake moment Dean thought only of keeping Dad quiet so he wouldn't wake up Sammy. Then his feet hit the hotel room floor and his adult body stretched too high above them, and this was not a childhood memory. His father lay in the screaming throes of a nightmare like he hadn't for years, and Dean had to fumble with both hands on the lamp, he was shaking so hard.

"Dad," he said, reaching out, the hands of a man and the voice of a boy. Muscular limbs struck out all at once, a burst designed to stun. John rolled upright, went a little too far and staggered before his muscles snapped into formation.

"Dad," Dean said again, and John flinched at the voice. His body bent, straightened, and bent again with the force of his breath.

When he spoke, it came out high and tight, a sound of anguish. "Sam?"

Dean went cold. The word passed through him in a wave, burning everything in its path with pure ice. *This is bad. This is very, very bad.* "No, Dad," he answered aloud, his voice alien to him. The lamp had been knocked over, and he leaned down, fighting dizziness, to pick it up. Light swung crazily over the room, surrounding him with illumination. "It's Dean."

“Jesus fuck!” Pent-up oxygen left John in a rush, and the room expanded outward with its force. Roving palms passed across his grizzled cheeks to his eyes, as though holding something in.

Always keep moving, dodging, distracting. “That was a hell of a nightmare,” Dean’s alien voice commented.

John sucked a long breath in through his teeth and dropped his hands. Unfocused eyes found Dean’s face, paused, then widened. “You’re bleeding.”

A treacherous hand almost rose to follow his father’s alarmed gaze. But that would be a mistake, and he could not afford to make mistakes right now. He bought himself a moment by turning to place the lamp back on the bedside table. If he was wrong, the stitches holding them both together would need mending.

But if he was right, then he was blind and deaf in a room of razor blades. A wrong step and they’d both be shredded.

“Got a little too close,” Dean said carefully. “Forgot that you turn into a jack-in-the-box when you wake up… like that.” He finished weakly, after such a stellar performance, and cursed those last two faltering syllables. They trailed behind the rest, clattering like tin cans on a string. His father heard, and his eyelids flinched slightly. Razor blades wavered, and Dean plunged on recklessly. “Still, not the worst I’ve ever had. I gotta say, Pops, you’re damn lucky I wasn’t a Sandman. If you’d hit one like that, it’d eat your eyeballs for grapes.”

A beat, and then the very air around his father unwound itself. “Smartass,” John Winchester muttered in his usual baritone, rubbing his forehead.

Encouraged, Dean went on. “No, seriously, Dad. That was a pansy-ass punch. Look, look, my nose isn’t even fully bloody, it’s just one nostril. The undead of the world quiver in terror.”

“Shut up, Dean,” his father snapped, but without any real venom, and a moment later he muttered something about deserving that as he marched across to the bathroom. “Try not to get any blood on the sheets,” he called over his shoulder, leaving Dean in the bedroom thinking *If I had a nickel*.

John came back with a warm, damp towel. “Siddown and tilt your head back,” he ordered tersely, but the fingers that pinched Dean’s nose through the washcloth were careful.

Dean accepted the silent apology. He always did. “Are my modeling days over?” he inquired, his voice nasal and muffled by the cloth. Somewhere above him, John snorted but made no other reply except to wipe a bit of blood from Dean’s jaw with a corner of the washcloth. Dean felt suddenly young with his head tilted back and his father fussing over him, or as close as John Winchester came to fussing. Dean was quite old enough to take care of his own damn nosebleed, thanks very much. But the simple action of his father’s hands fixing, helping, steadying felt so familiar and safe that for a moment Dean sat still under them, and felt sure he had been wrong.

“What was the nightmare about?” It hadn’t been the usual kind… as in, the name ‘Mary’ hadn’t been mixed in with his father’s screams. John’s hands paused in their ministrations, then continued.

“Damndest thing,” he grunted. “Sam and I were in a laundromat… just some crappy little place, middle of the night. But there was this girl,” his voice faltered, then went on, “with a knife, and she kept talking about price. I thought she meant quarters for the machines.” John swallowed audibly. “Then she cut Sam’s throat. I couldn’t stop her. I couldn’t even move.” The low voice stumbled again, then cleared its throat.

The washcloth hid Dean’s face. When his father finally took it away, every feature was in place, every line delicately arranged. “Think something’s trying to mess with your head?” he asked, and only his lips moved. Everything else stayed put.

John grunted again. “Maybe. Better line the doors.”

Dean stood, the picture of grace, and caught his father’s arm. “I’ll do it. You go back to sleep. I got punched in the nose, and you’re the one who looks like Hell.”

John tossed an irritated glance and the towel at his son, but lay back down with a sigh.

Two minutes later he was asleep. Ten minutes later Dean had lines of salt around every doorway, window sill, and vent. He even circled the toilet. In the darkness his body finally betrayed him, shaking and stumbling with the force of his fear. The lines he laid were uneven and lumpy, and Dean cursed in ragged whispers as the last of the salt trickled out. Flinging down the empty container, Dean crouched in the bathroom, listening for his father’s even breath and gripping the edge of the sink.

Then John's breathing hitched and he made a faint noise of distress in his sleep. Whatever moved through his subconscious, salt didn't do a damn thing.

Dean wrenched the front door open, beyond caring whether it woke John up or scattered salt lines. He sprinted along the causeway, half-fell down the stairs, banged his knee against the Impala's bumper. *Not salt, not salt, God, what else?* The trunk popped open, and shaky hands plunged, flinging aside useless weapons. *What else is there - - holy water, no, it's not impure, crossed salt. Pentagram? Maybe*. He clutched the five-pointed object so hard metal drove into his palm. *What what what - - Sandman succubus, no, please someone help me, Sam Mom, he's all I've got left, maybe - -*

Something moved behind him. It made no sound, but its passing sent a shiver through the air.

A few things happened at once. Dean swung around and dropped into a half-crouch in time to see a small shape moving quickly away from him, up the motel steps and down along the balcony. Somewhere out of sight, a door slammed shut like a gunshot. Immediately there came a high, wailing shriek of pain, from a throat that was not human.

Dean left the car empty-handed and took the steps two at a time. As he ran, something large and dark came up and over the balcony opposite their door, dropping fifteen feet to the ground with a heavy thump. The moment it hit pavement, it moved fast away from the building, cutting across the parking lot. It turned back only once, in a pool of light cast by a street lamp. Dean watched, his heart in his throat, as his father's face melted and changed into something monstrous and twisted with rage. Then the Nuckalavee went on running, though with an oddly stumbling gait.

Splashed across the concrete outside their door was a swath of dark liquid that stank of decay and rotten fish. Dean reached the portal and closed his hand around the knob. He had half a second to register the presence of a strange symbol scrawled on the door's surface, and another half second to think that it looked familiar, before he was inside.

He'd left the lamp on. In the dim light, a small *thing* looked up from its place crouched on the floor and froze.

Outside, another door opened and a voice slurred with sleep shouted, "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Dean shut the door instinctively, and after a moment their angry neighbor did likewise. In the silence afterwards, Dean and the thing on the floor stared at one another.

John gave an oblivious snort of sleep, his mouth hanging open. The thing's head cocked in his direction; Dean couldn't see its eyes, the lamp was at its back, but he had the impression it was looking back and forth between him and his father. Dean shifted his weight, coming into the room a bit further, and the thing shifted just as cautiously, drawing back and away. Its head cocked again, downward, and Dean followed that movement. Drawn on the floor around his father's bed were three signs similar to the one on the door, similar to, *similar to* - -

Dean's mind flipped the switch, and like a slot machine the dots popped up one after another. *Me, Dad, Arizona. Anasazi symbols scratched in dirt and "somebody must be watching out for you."*

His breath caught and held. His father's went on undisturbed.

After a moment, the thing on the floor moved the tiniest bit. A hand emerged from the rest of the body, reaching out to the symbol before it. The hand held something small and black, and it drew quickly, a few swirling lines that unmistakably completed the symbol.

The hand retreated and nothing happened for another moment. Dean couldn't seem to get his balance.

The thing rose and turned toward his father's bed. That brought Dean's balance back, and he took a step forward. But his hands stayed at his sides, and his mouth stayed shut. The thing paused, its limbs drawn in tight around it. When he made no other move, a bare human-looking foot rose up and set itself on the edge of his father's bed. It leaned and stretched, balancing on that one foot in order to reach above the headboard and draw a smaller symbol on the wall. Then it soundlessly dropped back onto the floor, and stepped away from the bed.

It misjudged the distance a little and the back of its knees (or where knees would be on a human) ran into Dean's bed. Thrown off balance, it sat down with a bump, then stood upright again hurriedly.

A faint snore began in John's throat. Dean looked between him and the creature, and then slowly raised one hand to beckon. It took a while to obey, but finally stepped around the symbol drawn on the motel carpet and came across the room. It slowed as it neared him, and Dean got another strong feeling, this time that it wanted nothing

better than to make a run for it.

He reached out with one hand. Finding cloth, he closed a fist, even as the diminutive figure tried to flinch away from his touch. Using his larger size, he stepped and pivoted and pulled. It staggered, and something that felt like a hand closed around his wrist. But he succeeded in turning it to face the light.

The first impression Dean got was of long, tangled brown hair that fell around and over a thin face. Beneath bushy eyebrows, the piggy eyes of that face stared at him, glinting with unmistakable fright. A prominent nose hooked above narrow, uneven lips.

It was, on the whole, the ugliest little face that Dean had ever seen on a human. If it was human, which he doubted.

He still had ahold of the thing's shirt, or whatever. He released it slowly, not entirely convinced that it wouldn't try running. It didn't, but clearly wanted to from the way its eyes darted toward the door. Dean took a chance and stepped back to get a better look. The creature's body was even more puzzling. It had on some kind of filthy, baggy tunic and what looked like equally-filthy pants held up with rope. Over the tunic it wore a torn black suit jacket. Its feet were bare. Hanging from around its neck, its waist, tied to the jacket and peeking out of pockets were a variety of objects. Peering closer, Dean could make out pouches, small jars, odd instruments, a Crucifix, a Star of David, an Ankh, and a million other charms and emblems. In the creature's long, delicate fingers, it clutched a piece of black charcoal.

It still looked longingly at the door. Dean tried for communication. "Hi."

That brought the small eyes back around. They gazed up and up at him – *Christ, what is it, four and a half feet tall?* But it made no reply except to glance back at John nervously.

Dean took the indirect point. He weighed his options, then stepped sideways and reached for the doorknob without taking his eyes off their visitor.

It watched him open the door, but did not move. Dean stood in the portal and folded his arms, heart pounding. He stood between it and freedom; if it meant them harm, it would do it now, or come on his terms. And given whatever it had done to the Nuckalavee, he'd no doubt it was capable of doing a little damage.

Thin shoulders hunched together, and then it shuffled forward even slower than before, huddled as far away from Dean as the doorway would allow. He closed a fist on the shoulder of its tunic as it passed, and shut the door behind them.

The journey to the parking lot remained silent: Dean didn't want to risk waking their angry neighbor, or else the thing under his hand *would* run and he'd never get any answers. It was already shaking badly, shivering with alarm or fright or cold or God knows what. Maybe it was like a Chihuahua, perpetually quivering.

In the parking lot he positioned his little humanlike Chihuahua against the Impala, and finally released it. "Okay then," he began, and then fell silent, because he really hadn't planned anything further than that. It kept shifting back and forth, playing nervously with the charcoal. It seemed disinclined to start conversation, so Dean forced his mouth open again. "Arizona?"

It twitched, blinked, shifted, and finally spoke. "Yes. Mm… yes. I was there."

Its voice was as small and strange as the rest of it, barely more than a croak. It echoed through memories of fever dreams and a 911 tape. And his dreams in Durango. Which brought up another bar on the slot machine. "Colorado?"

It ducked its head and nodded wordlessly, peeking at Dean through matted hair. The movement put Dean in mind of some forest creature peering out from the bracken.

"And what exactly are you?"

It shuffled its feet. "I don't have a name."

Strike that one. Dean tried again. "Why are you following us?"

"It's what I do."

"What you do?"

It nodded rapidly. "My family – we used to live with the, with the… Indians?" Its hairy eyebrows drew together further until they formed a continuous bush. "That's what you call them?"

"I think they prefer Native Americans."

“But they’re not!” Its voice rose a little and got twice as fast. “We were here longbeforethem. And when they came, we showed them the land and helpedthemgrowhere, and we blessed their hunters. We lived with them,” its face fell, “until – until they didn’t want us anymore.”

Dean rocked back on his heels. *What is it with people rewriting history tonight?* “You blessed their hunters.”

The tiny black eyes rose to meet his. It nodded.

Dean stared back for a moment, then looked around the parking lot. It was about 1 AM, and besides the cars of a few late-night revelers, the roads were empty. Across the street was the 24-hour diner. He returned his gaze to the… thingy, and considered it for a moment.

It had driven away a Nuckalavee along with whatever plagued his father’s dreams, and saved his life in Arizona. The least he could do was feed the damn… thingy. “Do you like pie?”

The thing blinked. “I’ve never had any.”

“Well, we need to fix that,” Dean announced. In the aftermath of panic, his knees wobbled and his throat felt raw, all tight and painful like he’d been screaming. He desperately needed an excuse to sit down. “C’mon, there’s a diner across the street.”

It froze, eyes wide. “I can’t go over there!” it protested, voice coming out at a high squeak.

“Why not?”

“They’ll see me.” It huddled in on itself again.

Dean reached back and pulled on the back of his sweater, yanking it over his head. “Here, put this on.” He dropped the cloth over its hair without waiting for a reply. The sweater dropped easily past non-existent shoulders, all the way to the thing’s knees. Its arms, when it wrestled them into the sleeves, barely reached the elbows.

The hood fell over its face, and it tilted its head way back to stare up at Dean. Hair pushed forward stuck out from around its face like a beard. Dean carefully wiped his features of amusement and nodded. “There. Nobody’ll see a thing. C’mon, I’m buying.”

-o-

It took some more convincing, but finally Dean maneuvered them across the street and into a corner booth. The thingy's nervous twitching doubled, and its shoulders seemed about to collapse in on themselves. When their half-asleep waitress staggered over, it nearly jumped out of its seat.

"What'll you have?" The woman's watery eyes blinked curiously at the figure buried under Dean's sweater. It was hunched so low its face almost touched the tabletop.

Dean, seeing that charm was in order, painted on his widest grin. "Pie. Lots and lots of pie. You do have some, right?"

She shifted focus to him, blinked again for an entirely different reason, and smiled. He'd been in here before; he knew full well their extensive stock of baked goods, and the names of every waitress. "Honey," she answered, waking up in a hurry and kicking her own brand of charm into motion, "we've got enough pie to turn you blue. Now just what are you lookin' for?"

Dean lounged, tilting his chin up. She was old enough to be his mother, and probably married, but damn if she didn't know how to flirt the wee hours of the night away. "Ladies choice, Carol. Whatever you like. And a slice for – for Puck, too."

He said it without thinking, he was so focused on getting her away from the table so The Thingy wouldn't have a hyperventilating fit. But a sweatered head rose and as Carol shuffled away it leaned across the salt shaker. "What did you call me?"

Dean paused in his scan of the diner's few occupants. A memory teetered, tipped, and dropped.

"Dude, this is a fucked up play."

"Dean, would you please just read *the* lines*?" 15-year-old Sam stood in the center of Dean's bedroom, full of braces, odd angles induced by growth spurts, and simmering irritation. His script lay on the floor at his feet.*

"I'm just saying, this is even weirder than that one with the dead chick last year. And why the hell do you want to be a fairy, for Chrissake?" He said it with a grimace, as though it offended the entire Winchester family line. Which in his opinion, it might.

"It's Shakespeare, *Dean!" Sam leveled his best 'you're such an idiot' glare.*

“And he’s a hobgoblin, not a fairy. Puck is a classic character, he’s one of Shakespeare’s best anti-heroes. Now are you going to help me or not?”

Dean settled back against his headboard, crossed his legs, and struggled on through the difficult verse. “I wonder if Titania be awaked/Then, what it was that next came in her eye/Which she must dote on in extremity./ Here comes my messenger.” He waved dramatically in Sam’s direction. “How now, mad spirit!/ What night-rule now about this haunted grove?”

Sam took a deep breath. “My mistress with a monster is in love - ”

“See, right there!” Dean exclaimed. “The dude’s drugged his wife and tricked her into sleeping with a half-human, half-donkey creature! That’s like… adulterous date-raping bestiality!”

The script was ripped out of his hands so fast it gave him a paper cut. “Why do you have to make fun of everything I do?” Sam’s eyes were cold.

The bell on the diner’s door tinkled. “Puck,” Dean responded at last. “He’s a… fairy, in Shakespeare. Classic character. Anti-hero.” He met the beady eyes of his companion and shrugged. “It came to mind.”

The Thingy frowned and opened its mouth, but then Carol reappeared with a plate in either hand and it nearly ran its large nose into the saltshaker, it ducked so fast. Dean leaned back, grateful for the pause to wrestle his bearings. “Two slices chocolate meringue pie,” Carol said with a wide smile, plopping the heaping plates down in front of them. She’d added a liberal dose of vanilla ice cream to each plate. “You boys enjoy.”

That did the trick. When Carol retreated, Puck – *might as well, dunno what else to call him, and I* think *it’s a him* – reached one hand to slowly push the hood back a little. He stared at the plate in front of him. Dean watched, momentarily forgetting his father, brother, dreams, and monsters in the face of such uninhibited wonder and delight.

“This is pie?” Fork tongs, clutched in a fist, nudged at the ice cream.

“Actually no.” Dean sat forward, lifting his own fork and poking crust. In the corner of his eye, thin fingers shifted to mirror his grip on the utensil. “This is pie. That’s ice cream.” He scooped a large portion of both into his mouth and sat back.

Despite his excitement, Puck remained cautious. He prodded his dessert for a minute, sniffing and investigating until the ice cream

started to melt. Then he took a sliver of pie adorned with a layer of ice cream, and lifted it to his lips. For a moment his face went blank. Then he made a strange sound in the back of his throat, and he smiled tentatively. It was a child's smile, full of discovery, the kind that you could not help but return.

Dean grinned back. "Pie."

Puck's smile widened, revealing crooked yellowish teeth which spoiled the effect somewhat. Then a new patron came in the door, ringing the bell, and Puck yanked the hood back into place. But he leaned over his plate and the fork went to work, lifting food to the hidden face with complete disregard for how much hair got in the way.

"Aw, c'mon, you don't look that weird. You could pass for a midget." *An ugly midget.*

Puck shook his head vehemently, speaking around a mouthful. "Not s'posed to let them see me. Ada said not to, never let them see you."

Dean perked. "Who's Ada?"

"Father." Puck swallowed and straightened a little bit, as though the topic demanded his full attention and respect. "Father always said, 'never let them see you, they'll laugh at you.' We used to live with the Indians, and their hunters were good and always gave us part of their kills, to thank us for keeping them safe on the hunt. But then a sickness came, and the elders died and the youngers – theydidn'tlikeus, they threwsticks. All the hunters built cities instead. So my family, they went away into the woods up North, and no one follows hunters anymore."

His fork scraped against ceramic. Dean stared; he'd never seen pie disappear so fast. "But you do?"

Puck flinched like he'd been hit. When he spoke, it was so low that Dean had to strain to hear. "They threw me away. After Ada died." A whuffling, shaky sigh blew through the curtain of hair, and one pale fingertip drew circles on the tabletop. "I'm half human. Ama was a woman. But she died, and so did Ada, so when the rest went North…" he trailed off, and one shoulder lifted and dropped with all the strength of a dead fish. "They left me."

Sam looked over his shoulder as the bus doors closed between them. Next stop, a better life, without you. Freak.

Dean pushed his plate across the table. “That sucks.” Puck cocked his head sideways, and Dean smiled as gently as he could, nodding encouragement. After a moment, Puck raised his fork again.

“So,” Dean went on, watching with amazement as crust and filling fell before the onslaught, “of all the hunters in the world, you chose to follow me around?”

“There aren’t true hunters anymore,” Puck replied, bits of crust flying as he spoke. “Most that hunt do it for, for *fun*,” he said it with horror and disgust, “but not for what they need. Not like you.” He peeked again, shyly, then quickly returned his attention to his meal. “Even your Ada, he hunts for revenge. But you, you hunt for your family. For all your family.” He gestured with the fork, waving it to indicate the rest of the diner’s patrons.

Dean blinked at his new extended kin. Grizzled, overweight truckers glowered into their coffee. “How did you find me?”

Puck swallowed and swiped at his mouth. He had whipped cream in his hair. “I was following the older hunter.”

Dean looked up sharply. “Mastema?”

“Yes. She doesn’t always hunt on this side of the sea, but whenever she does, I follow her.” Puck paused and stared out the window. “She’d gone away,” he said softly. “Gone away to the man in Arizona, made herself human for him. She didn’t hunt for years and I was afraid she would forget how to. She almost did, and I thought… I thought sheshouldnothavegoneaway. But he made her happy.” Light from a truck passing outside made him look away, at the half-eaten pie and Dean. “She is not happy often.”

“Yeah, I got that impression,” Dean murmured, then refocused. “So while you were keeping tabs on her, you just happened to see me and Dad?”

Puck licked at chocolate filling on the corners of his mouth. “You seemed like you needed a Nagumwasuck.”

The last word came out garbled, like someone had thrown the syllables in a blender and hit ‘puree.’ “A what?” Dean asked, leaning forward.

“A Nagumwasuck. What my family used to be to the Indians. The protectors.” Puck bit his lower lip. “I’m not a very good one, though,”

he admitted in a miserable croak. “The olders, they could move rivers, heal sicknesses. I can barely put out a bonfire.” His eyes blinked, then widened, and he looked quickly at Dean with sudden fear.

Dean sat back hard against the booth and looked away. Outside a drunken group of teenagers laughed and staggered by, full of booze and their own ignorant confidence.

The night. The bonfire. A smile like dead bones, and the metallic smell of Merrill’s blood. He hadn’t thought about Arizona in a while.

“What,” he began, then cleared his throat. “What’s wrong with my father?” Puck drew a slow breath. Dean saw, and his stomach turned. “That bad?”

“It’s a poena, Dean.”

He stared, frozen. “A Fury?”

Puck nodded. “The Nuckalavee invoked it, sent it for your Ada. It saw him in the police station, knew what he was after. I broke the summoning when I shut the door on its hand, but it’ll recover soon, and it’ll invoke the poena again. Andthistime…”

“What?”

Puck met his eyes, and a quiver wracked his thin frame again. “The Nuckalavee can’t cross over the Older Signs, but a poena…” His croaking little voice broke, then struggled on. “It’s not good and it’s not evil. It’s retribution, and it’ll never stop. Not until whoever it’s after has suffered enough, and has given a blood price.

“It’s just starting now… learning your father’s mind. It’ll find what he values most, the one thing that he loves more than anything else, and it’ll take it from him.”

Sam used to say that Dean’s mind operated like a fuse box: all intuition and instinct that flipped seemingly random switches faster than Sam’s logic or Dad’s experience. Well, not faster, exactly. Those two were straight wires pulled taut, and could move from A-to-B in the heartbeat space between a werewolf’s snarl and its bite. But Dean… Dean could flip a switch and have a light go on in an entirely different room. The trouble was, Sam would say with familiar exasperation after a hunt or a fight or both, sometimes the fuses blew and information went down a frayed wire into nothingness. Dean could watch a child’s eyes as she described a vampire attack and know

that her perfectly human uncle was molesting her. But he could also see six envelopes marked “Stanford University” pass through the mailbox and still stare in shock at a pair of bus doors, closing shut with his brother on the other side.

And Dean let him say that, let him believe it rather than whisper the truth. Every circuit tripped, every surge danced along wires, but some rooms Dean did not want to see in cold light. Places only he could see, connections only he would make. It was not a conscious thing; instinct and intuition felt the bolt of fear from six envelopes crackling to life, and cut the switches, isolating it, keeping it from his mind. So the endless current circled and circled looking for ground.

He felt it now, a frisson that ran from the back of his head down into his gut, dancing along his bones like power lines. And in the safer, lit portions of his mind, Dean saw his father’s face, mirrored in two, one sleeping peacefully and one savage, glaring as it shape-shifted into something else.

Inside, the other charge hummed. But it did not reach ground. Not yet.

“How do I stop it?” he asked, still as the earth.

Puck saw, knew, his small black eyes watchful. But he did not speak it, and Dean thought, *yeah, if you looked past the height and the face and the twitching, he’d make a perfectly good guardian angel*.

“Kill the Nuckalavee.”

Dean smiled, all teeth. “Now that I can handle.”

-o-

He didn’t. He could have, would have, was actually closing in on snarling fangs when the dam broke and the poena shattered his father’s mind.

They’d tracked a trail of butchered house pets and frightened reports 7 miles north to the Watertown Airport. The instant they’d crested the hill and seen the planes laid out before them, Dean had cursed, and kept on cursing. He cursed through stealing a boat and heading out into the black water, his father at the motor and Dean loading weapons to keep his hands from shaking. The uneven water surged around them, threatening at every moment to leap over the side of the small water craft. Dean cursed it, and himself. It was stupid, in

retrospect, so fucking stupid, but he'd been nearly desperate and circles laid around his father's red-rimmed eyes, so neither of them were exactly in their right minds.

The lights of the town swished past, and then the bay opened outward into endless water. It waited with a gaping mouth to swallow them.

"Where do you think?" Dean shouted over the roar of the motor. When no response came, he looked back, heart thumping. In the moonlight John's eyes glinted white, his mouth hanging open. His hand on the rudder was loose.

Dean leaned, grasped his father's coat, and shouted in his ear, "DAD."

"There was a girl in North Carolina."

Dean lurched away, and the boat rocked, swiveling. They were still moving at a fast clip, and the wind whistled past his ears. It sounded like screaming.

They faced each other in the near-darkness, eyes wide, searching the shadows of each other. "There was a girl in North Carolina," John repeated, his voice carrying over the motor and the sound of rushing water. Droplets of reflected liquid splashed on his cheeks, but he did not wipe them away.

"Dad," Dean said, desperate. "Where was the island that they found the fishermen?"

"Twenty miles west," his father's voice responded tonelessly. "Blood calls for blood."

"Okay." Dean picked up a shotgun, cocked it. "Okay."

He did not give his father a gun. He knew they wouldn't make it, even before they got to shore and saw the sea plane. Another boat had been dragged up onto the beach and Dean's heart leapt upward for a moment, hoping.

And then, standing thigh-deep in water, John said high and strangled, "You knew about her."

Dean couldn't spin around fast enough; the water resisted and pushed at his legs. He staggered a little, dropping down to his waist into the cold lake until he found his footing. Behind him, he could hear snarling along the tree line. More than one – *fuck, a whole tribe, waiting*

out here for 10,000 years for stupid desperate fuckers in a boat…

"You *knew*," John screamed, and Dean had one hand on the boat and one wrapped around the shotgun. Water held him and he couldn't dodge the punch. It wasn't some half-awake flail; the roundhouse slammed into his cheekbone, knocking his head like a pinball into the boat's hard side. A fuse burst in his brain, light and pain as he slid down into the water.

It closed around him, wicked with delight, rushing into his nose and mouth. Dean breathed without thinking, and the water swelled in. Distantly he felt hands close around his throat, lifting him. Air on his face and he coughed, choking first from the liquid and then from the fingers driving into his neck. His father's fingers. Dean pushed ineffectually at them, fighting to stay conscious, fighting to fight.

John's face swung above him. He hoisted Dean a little higher, and Dean went, limp and helpless. He stared, coughing, into a moonlit expression of pure hatred. John's eyes were not black, but then again, the poena was neither good nor evil. And it would have its due.

"Blood calls for blood," John said through clenched teeth, then pushed Dean's head back under the water.

It wasn't quite right, even half-conscious and drowning Dean knew he wasn't the one the poena really wanted, but obviously it wasn't in a picky mood. Water began to fill him, and his body convulsed weakly, still too stunned to do anything other than clutch and kick with rapidly-deteriorating strength.

And then John's hands jerked and loosened. Dean, spots dancing behind his eyes, couldn't even find a surface to rise to. Another grip clutched his shoulder, but these fingers were different, and they dragged him into air.

Then he lay on the shore, spitting up water and listening to the boat's motor as it faded away over the lake.

"Fuck," a voice said beside him. "Motherfucking cocksucking bastard."

When Dean could breath, he croaked, "Mastema?"

"Of course, you stupid fuck," she spat.

The snarling had grown louder, nearer. Dean struggled to haul himself upright, throat working to suck oxygen into his burning lungs. His

head throbbed, and hot blood trickled down over the side of his face. “Where did he go?”

“Back to land, my guess,” Mastema replied shortly. “The Fury’s got him good. It’s wrapped his mind up so tight, nothing’ll reach him short of a proper killing.”

Dean reached out in the blackness, groping for the shotgun. “I have to kill the Nuckalavee. It’s summoning the poena… if I kill it…”

Her mirthless laughter rang out above him. “Which one? In case you haven’t noticed, there are about thirty closing in on us here. A whole tribe, just waiting for the rescue party to return and get them off this rock.”

Dean’s heart sank. But the rest of him staggered upright under the weight of dizziness and despair. “You got a gun or something? ‘Blaze of glory’ springs to mind right now.”

He could just barely see her in the dark, a faint outline against the light stones of the shore. She didn’t respond immediately and he realized that he’d managed to surprise her.

Then she gripped his shoulder again, and when she spoke it was the voice he’d heard in a hilltop graveyard in Arizona. “Take my boat. Get out of here, get to Sam.”

Dean, caught off guard, reeled slightly under her hand. She tightened her grip, hauling him across the pebbled beach. A shadow flitted out of the blackness and Mastema pushed Dean forward and down. Something bright and metal flashed in the darkness, and then a familiar high shriek rent the night. The snarling around them changed, grew angry.

Mastema’s voice at his ear was breathless, and laughing again. “Now if there was a merciful God,” she remarked, “that would have been the Nuckalavee that called up the Fury and you and Daddy could go home happy.”

Dean put a hand out blindly and found damp wood. Mastema’s boat. She pushed him at it, but he turned back to her. “Wait… you - ”

“Do you not get it?” she growled, adrenaline scratching her already rough voice. “The Fury can’t take physical form. So how the fuck do you think it’s going to get its blood?”

Switches tripped. Fuses blew. “Dad.”

“Sam.” Her voice rang cold, making the connection. The same one he’d made in a diner with Puck, but hadn’t dared to see. He saw it now – *blood for blood, the same but opposite. Possession and a cut throat, a child killed. Sam*.

Behind her, shapes closed in. She faced him the dark. “Run fast, Dean. If these fuckers take me out, you’re gonna bury someone tomorrow.”

He was already moving, diving into the boat and hitting its bottom. Fumbling in the dark, he found the motor’s rip cord, wrenched at it. The engine sputtered to life, and he cranked it up so high he almost fell backwards out of the boat as it lurched into the water.

Behind him, the Nuckalavees converged and steel flashed. High laughter full of amusement and despair rose out across the empty expanse.

-o-

It started raining again before he made it to land. In the dock was his father’s boat, but the Impala was missing from the side street. Bleeding from the head and half-drowned, Dean sprinted two miles flat out in about twelve minutes.

The lady behind the terminal counter stared as he pushed through the line, but he’d had the presence of mind to wipe away the trickle of blood, and rain excused his shivering dampness. When he gasped about a deathly ill brother in California, she got on the phone to every airplane in the small terminal, and found him a puddle-jumper to Syracuse, and thence to San Francisco.

She told him that he’d just missed a plane to San Jose. He did not ask if any wet, disheveled men had boarded that flight.

He bought a hooded sweater in the airport commissary, and sweatpants to match. In the bathroom he wadded towels against the cut on his temple, and pulled the hood up high over the reddening paper. Hiding, just like someone else he knew, but couldn’t remember. There wasn’t room in Dean’s mind for anything other than *Dad* and *Sam*, two currents driving him forward through exhaustion and pain.

He’d never taken a plane before, had never needed to. He hated it instantly, all that blackness staring back from the windows. In a car, with the pedal pressed to the floor, he could feel the movement, could

tell how fast he was going. But despite the super-sonic roar outside, it felt like a crawl, as lights from the earth passed below in inches.

Unconsciousness rose up and swallowed him. He woke up – *an hour? a second?* – with a frightened stewardess' hand on his arm and *Sam Dad* screaming on his lips.

It was raining in San Francisco, too, which didn't surprise him. There was water everywhere, the bay on one side and the sea on the other, and all of it was inarguably salt, salt like tears, salt like blood. Dean stole a car and hurtled fifteen miles through a city on the verge of waking.

He'd seen Stanford only once before, on a side trip to sit outside Sam's window and critically examine his dilapidated shutters. They hadn't discussed their destination beforehand, but Dean and John somehow came to a silent agreement that Oregon was just too close to California to avoid it any longer, and they'd swung down, and through, on their way to reports of a werewolf. On their way to Arizona.

It looked the same in the faint pre-dawn light: bright bricks, red tile rooftops, archways and green lawns. Dean took a corner too fast and struck a corner stand advertising an upcoming feminist rally in the Quad, whatever the fuck that was. He went to ground up the street from Sam's small apartment, which perched atop a hill to the north of campus. A long stretch of back yards led from the campus to his door. Dean hopped over a neighbor's fence, staggered on the landing, and dropped to one knee.

As he fell, something whistled just above his head. There was a *thunk* and crack of wood. Dean lurched sideways, rolling, and came up on his feet.

John tugged at the axe, but it was inarguably buried in the fence. He released the handle and reached for his back, face twisted. "You're persistent, I'll give you that," he hissed, drawing out the Beretta.

Dean launched forward, throwing his shoulders against that familiar frame. They crashed backwards through the fence, wood splintering. Hot breath blew across his face, and the body underneath him twisted. Dean brought his elbow up just in time to protect his ribs from the upper cut. But he managed to wrench the gun free. It clattered away into the darkness, and then Dean was thrown sideways, pitched off, and his father came up on top, hands again on Dean's bruised neck.

"You love to be the hero, don't you, Deano?" A childhood nickname

twisted on those lips, and brown eyes burned into his. “You love to pretend you can make things right, when all you ever do is fuck up everything you touch.”

Dean bucked his legs, catching one knee around his father’s shoulder, and wrenched. It was John’s turn to fall sideways, but he still had a strong hold on Dean’s arm, and the momentum kept them going, rolling over again and again down the grassy hill.

At the bottom, they hit a small stream, a minor woodland area probably popular among the potheads and neckers. Dean’s shoulder bumped hard against a tree trunk, and their bodies jostled apart.

Almost instantly, John was back up on his feet, face set, the determination of a madman. Dean caught his lunge on one leg and flung him backwards hard, then used the tree to haul himself upright.

They faced each other in the near blackness, each panting with effort.

“Dad,” Dean choked. “Please, Dad.”

John laughed, low and vicious. “You’re begging? Good. She begged, too, and I still killed her. Just like Sam will beg.”

Dean’s stomach twisted. “It wasn’t you,” he stammered, “there was a demon, it possessed you - ”

“If you really believed that,” John interrupted, taking a step closer, “why didn’t you ever tell me about her? If I wasn’t to blame, why keep it a secret?”

Dean opened his mouth, but had no answer. John did not wait for one and swung. Dean ducked low and came up, counter-jabbing automatically. It connected, and John grunted, then laughed.

“Good, Dean!” he crowed. “I taught you how to fight pretty well, didn’t I? I taught you how to be a killer.” He feinted to Dean’s head, then stepped in and swung low. This time Dean wasn’t fast enough, and breath left him in a woosh as John’s fist went straight into his ribcage. He threw out an elbow instinctively, and smashed his father’s nose. He spun away holding his side.

“Dad,” and he was practically whimpering by now, “Dad.”

John swiped at his face and regarded the blood on his fingers with approval, then leveled his gaze at Dean. “You always wanted more,

didn't you? You always wanted to be good, to be a hero." A wide grin split his face, and in the faint light it looked more demonic than black eyes and sharpened teeth. "Why don't you go ask your ass-fucking friend in Arizona how much of a hero you are?"

He came again, all square shoulders and determination. Dean staggered backwards, feeling something crumble, feeling his limbs push anything, everything, to get away. A fist connected with his gut and he doubled over, straight into a knee that smashed into his forehead. He fell backwards, landing in shallow water.

Water. Blood and water.

His father's face, above him, smirking. "I'm not going to kill you, Dean," he said gently, "I never loved you enough for you to be the price I pay. Blood calls for blood, and there's someone else I love more." He turned, and started up the hill. Towards Sam.

Sam.

Just like that, a light switch flipped in the dark and everything closed off. Fear, pain, grief. *Flip, flip, flip*. Mom. Dad. *Flip*. Gone.

Dean. *Flip*. Gone.

Only one circuit remained open, the one he'd never fully turned on, that he'd never dared to release all the way for fear of its power. Its current sang, vibrating, exploding outward, burning everything else into ash.

SAM.

"Get the fuck back here you son of a bitch."

He was on his feet, somehow. He couldn't remember how that happened. It didn't matter. It was his father's face in front of him, staring, and that didn't matter either. Dean planted his back foot and beckoned.

"You made me a killer. So come here and die."

-o-

Thick fog moved in from the water, refracting the mid-morning light. Dean almost liked San Francisco; there were places to hide here, places in the mist where whole buildings disappeared. He sat on a

bench overlooking the bay and watched the city come to life.

Beside him sat his cell phone. It had rung a few hours ago, and Puck's croaking voice practically screamed into his ear that the Nuckalavee was dead and the poena's hold on John had dissolved. He did not mention Mastema and Dean did not ask. He was too busy racing back to the grove of trees where he'd left his father's beaten body.

He chucked both their wallets in the stream, then called an ambulance and reported a mugging. Then he lay down on the damp earth.

He didn't look for a pulse in the bloody form beside him.

They found one anyway and that was a miracle and a half. The doctors looked grim but promised their best. Dean nodded gravely, as he should, and answered every question accordingly.

He had not called Sam. He would not call Sam. He left his cell phone sitting on the bench and walked away into the mist.

And that was the end of the 572nd day.

Chapter 5: The 763rd Day: Erratio

The 763rd Day: Erratio

There were loose ends.

Loose end #1: A mess of tubes and stitches that held his father together.

For four months, Dean arrived at the start of visiting hours and left when they ended. After the first three weeks, when the doctors began to greet him with smiles rather than heavy sighs, he knew John would live. They moved him from intensive care into an eight-foot by ten-foot room, warm earth tones on the walls and a small window facing East. Dean preferred it to the ICU: it suited his purposes better, no window into the hall for someone to see through, only a heart monitor that summoned a nurse if anything irregular occurred. Which could be short-circuited, if the need arose.

If the need arose.

They had his real name. Their real address in Lawrence or as real as any address he'd ever had. He wondered briefly if someone lived there now, if they'd rebuilt the place, paved over the wounds and erased the Winchesters from record. With any luck the house was between owners and the lengthy hospital bills would go unreturned for a while, because Dean owned nothing but the clothes on his back.

Fall gave way to a solid winter, and Dean shivered in doorways and on park benches. San Francisco had a temperate climate, but steady wind blew in from the ocean, making it seem colder than it was. In December it began to rain, more goddamned water, and he lived in a constant state of dampness. At first he'd thought it wouldn't be too hard… this was San Fran, after all. But the new mayor had instituted some crackdown on homelessness. The one night, when he'd strolled past a restaurant and the smell alone spurred his stomach to eat the rest of his organs in desperation; the one night when he'd dropped whatever bit of pride and *himself* he was clinging to; the one night he shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and looked just to the left of the woman's eyes as he asked for some change, she'd snappishly pointed him to a shelter where he could get a room, as long as he agreed to get counseling and filled out a residency request form.

Hello, I hunt ghosts for a living and a demon killed my mother and I

almost beat my father to death while he was possessed…may I have some free slop and pity?

If this were Texas, there would be pool or poker or even bare-knuckle boxing matches he could win. The Sam Voice in his head – the only one that was left – reminded him that he could get a "real" job… but that would entail communicating with people beyond carefully-assembled smiles. It would mean building something back out of the ashes of himself and Dean kinda preferred starvation.

He went walking uphill with no geography in mind except that he wanted to get away from the water. He knew the general outline of San Francisco, had made a point – *Dad, too* – of memorizing the fastest route to Stanford from the airports, highways or docks – *by sea by land by air* – and he laughed at the fucking irony of that. The laugh rattled around his empty belly, hurting in sore places that felt like they might collapse.

"You sound like you're having a good time," said a voice from a car that he hadn't even noticed had pulled up next to him. And that should have alarmed him, that a car engine hadn't registered, but what the hell, he wasn't hunting. He wasn't anything. Dean ducked his head down, squinting through the dark rain.

A man in his forties looked back, too-calm and too-casual, and Dean suddenly realized that he was on Castro Street.

Rain drizzled on his back and wind slid fingers along his neck, tugging at the little warmth his skin had. He looked past the man's face at the car interior, all black leather.

What the hell. He wasn't hunting. He wasn't anything.

-o-

Halfway through, with his hands tied to a headboard and the man's breath in his ear, Dean thought of Merrill and bit a hole on the inside of his cheek.

It was a couple more times until Ivan, a rail-thin queen who actually took him home to food and a couch, gave him condoms, and told him that he should really be charging more than twenty bucks a pop. Dean didn't have any idea how much to charge, and said as much. Ivan stood in front of his open refrigerator with a gallon of milk and looked at Dean sideways, all quiet and curious and Dean had to leave.

-o-

A few weeks after New Year's, John decided that his resolutions would include regaining consciousness.

Dean arrived to greet a doctor's beaming face and felt something like a huge block of ice drop on his innards. The nurses were thrilled: they'd spent months pretending his father was well enough to eat solids and slipping his meals to Dean. They viewed him as their pet mystery, a quiet young prince in rags who smiled like he could charm, but never did. A son beyond devotion, who sat still as the earth through hunger and cold and heaven knows what else, watching his father's eyelids for the barest sign of life. They loved him

Dean left their smiles and went out to find a gun. He wouldn't suffocate his father with a fucking pillow. He would not snuff out such a strong life in such a weak and pathetic way. Gun, preferably, but a knife would do.

He wound up getting both. The Tenderloin district overflowed with criminal types and he stalked up and down the darkest alleys until he heard what he was waiting for: the shuffle-step of feet trailing his own, and then a blunt poke in his ribs. "Whatta ya got?" and it was just a kid with a scared, cocky smirk.

He broke the teeth and the arm, probably a few ribs. Took the gun and a knife from the kid's pocket, left him breathing shaky, but breathing, behind a dumpster. "Stay in school, kid. Seriously."

The prettier smiles were waiting where he'd left them. They clumped together like a forest, and it took him a while to deflect his way through. His post waited in the empty chair; his father's eyes were closed when Dean checked, so he sat down to wait.

After an hour, his father stirred a little, the faint signs of awakening. Dean took out the gun and put it on his knee. Waited.

He had to be sure. Sure that his father wouldn't spend six months in physical therapy, then limp out and cut Sam's throat.

Hazel eyes slitted, blinked at the ceiling, roamed a bit, found Dean, went still. Filled with the horror of memory.

Dean had thought himself beyond pain, but his hands shook anyway as he put the safety back on the pistol and tucked it away underneath the torn Army surplus jacket Ivan had given him. All at once he felt

the grease in his long uncut hair, the dirt under his nails, the bruises on his arms and back where hard fingers had dug in. He watched his father trace the bruised hollows of Dean's eyes and the wasting emptiness of his body.

Blessedly, there was a tube stuck down John's throat. So when Dean stood up, he could pretend that the little flop his father's hand made was a goodbye rather than a plea.

-o-

Loose end #2: The Impala.

Depending on where Dad had parked it, it had been towed instantly or marked as abandoned, *then* towed. Regardless, it was somewhere in the process of finding a new owner. He doubted they would demolish it – and that thought managed to twig a surge of horror through the comfortable oblivion – no, a sweet classic like that, they'd auction it. It'd go to some collector, who would never hear about the weird thing cops had taken out of the trunk. Four months would have given them enough time to investigate the weapons, but without any evidence of an actual crime, they wouldn't bother hanging on to the vehicle.

Which was good, because hidden in the bottom of the Impala, in a tiny compartment not even CSI could find, were Dean and Sam's birth certificates.

The hospital bills he didn't worry about. John would pull himself together well enough to handle those. But the last thing Dean wanted was for detectives to show up at Sam's door asking about his connection to a shitload of illegal guns, fake identities, and forged credit cards.

So, back to New York.

Flying was not an option, even if he could find the money. The thought of getting back on a plane, locking himself up in that slow-moving thing, helpless, at the mercy of mechanics, made him twist his fingers in memory. That slow crawl through night, on a desperate mission, Mastema's voice in his ears *You'll bury one of them*… no. No planes. Ground, instead.

He had about fifty bucks saved up from a month's "work" on Castro Street. A stolen car got him through Reno before the gas tank coughed its last. Food trumped gas and he ditched it rather than pay for fuel.

Then it took three hours for someone to pick him up and he almost froze to death.

The two Latino guys who finally pulled over looked at him with alarm and swore softly in Spanish. They tried to take him to a hospital, but Dean forced blue lips into a smile and refused. Exhaustion and hunger caught up to him and he passed out cold after a few miles. Fortunately, they respected his wishes about the hospital; he had a feeling they were illegals, and familiar to traipsing along the edges. Instead he woke up in a motel room tucked under the sheets, with the fifty bucks and the gun gone. Dean rolled out of bed and coughed, felt a sinking sensation when the sound rattled.

A fellow lodger lifted him to Salt Lake City, but before they even hit the Utah border, Dean knew he had a balls-out case of pneumonia. It didn't help that his new best friend Paul was a Mormon missionary, and kept saying in the most patient, gentle tone that Dean needed a doctor. Dean finally wrenched at the car door, barely waiting for Paul to brake before hopping out. He walked a hundred feet and started to wonder if pulling a knife on a missionary was equivalent to punching a nun before the blessed sounds of a car shifting gears and pulling away rang in his ears. He stopped and stood on the side of the highway in the twilight.

Mountain peaks splattered with snow and the last rays of sunlight rose around him, reaching up like fingers. He stood in the palm of a massive open hand, where roads and train tracks cut lifelines into the earth. They ran together and sprang away and Dean swayed like a dancer, rocking on heels and toes. The world seemed to turn around him and he followed the movement with his eyes, pivoting in a complete circle.

Gray earth, turning dark and indistinct. A darker spot out there, below one of the reaching fingers. He squinted. A house, and a road leading up to it, a line in the great palm, dictating a future that could only be read from high above. Away down to his left, distant lights moved on the highway, crawling closer… the lanterns of passing travelers.

He thought about that little compartment, tucked away beneath the Impala's loving belly. It would take so little to pry it open, but one had to have the exact right angle, know the right trajectory. And then two random slips of paper, laid together one over the other, would slid free. And indicate… what? To whom?

A hitch in his breathing made him cough and cough more, cold air

sticking claws into his throat and lungs.

The lanterns bobbed on the horizon. In the last bit of sunlight, Dean looked across the highway to the gravel pathway's signpost. "Oneil-Deeth County Road," but someone had come along with a spray can and made it the "Oneil-De*a*th County Road."

Dean laughed, the sound ragged and full of dangerous fluid. Drowning, miles away from water. "Well, that's a sign," he said to no one, and crossed the highway.

-o-

The hand closed in around him just as he reached the house. It squeezed his chest in a fist, and he leaned against a post on the decrepit front porch, breathing in shallow congested pants. The door fell inward when he pushed at it, and he dropped to hands and knees on the dirty wooden floor. It creaked beneath him, but did not break.

The inside of the house was barren as the outside; the darkness and his own dizziness made it treacherous. He did manage to shut the door, twisting his legs to guide it shut with a foot. Somehow decorum dictated that much. Perhaps there was a book somewhere: *Little Miss Manners, the Hunting Edition. On proper etiquette in the eventuality of one's own imminent demise. Chapter 1: Have You Shut the Door?* The empty spaces between the walls held an utter absence of life, bred and nurtured by long abandonment. From high above, wind whistled through a crack somewhere.

For some reason the sound snapped the last shred of control and he screamed. It rose up out of him where he lay on the ground, filling the small shack. This small hole in the dirt where he'd crawled – *fucking* crawled, *you broken toy soldier* – to die like an animal.

It didn't last long, his lungs gave out and he paid for it, turning his head to hack warm blood across his lips onto the floor. His body defied him, twisting and struggling to suck in another breath.

He crawled a little further, then, drove himself up mostly just to spite his determined body. Empty space to his left and he made his slow way in there, head hung low, pausing occasionally just to breathe. Nails in his lungs, but he pushed forward, gritting his teeth. Searching for the end, the absolute brick wall of his own endurance.

It came in a rush, like a hand pushing him down, and he went willingly, relieved.

-o-

Darkness.

Didn't surprise him. Atheism had its benefits: no help from God, but no Hell to burn in, either.

If only that goddamned whistle would stop.

-o-

When he opened eyes to Sam's face, he almost screamed in despair. Would have, if his lungs hadn't been filled up with his own blood. *Nonono, not you, Sam, you can't be here in the dark dead gone with me,* and he'd failed at that too, at the last task he'd been given, the poena must have still been in his father and it had killed his baby brother. He tried to reach out, find the wounds, but a weight lay on him, and he couldn't move.

It was Sam who laid a hand on Dean's forehead. He was burning, burning, and Dean's breath bubbled in his throat. Drowning and burning, both at once.

-o-

On the ceiling, except there were two ceilings and no floor. He was on one, pinned flat, his chest on fire. Above him and below him was his mother, burning, flames rippling out from around her like water and Dean screamed, felt the water pour in. There were hands on him, his father's hands, holding him under, and the flames moved across the top of the water, made it boil. He couldn't move, couldn't raise his fingers to reach for the fire, for her.

broken broken, toy soldier with his arms pulled off

-o-

When he opened his eyes a second time and looked into Sam's, he knew better. *Once burned, twice shy*, and he rasped, "Go away."

Dark eyes filled with tears, and Dean moaned. "Okay, that? Is not fair."

Sam made no reply, only hunched down a little closer, trailing long fingers across Dean's forehead, over his brow. Dean's eyelids fluttered shut of their own accord, and fingertips touched the delicate skin

there. Something shivered through him, an ancient memory imprinted on his subconscious. A woman's smooth finger, stroking his eyelids with soft touches, soothing tantrums and small hurts.

mom i'm sorry, i'm sorry did it all wrong everything life please come back

One of the fingertips caught a bit of moisture and drew it across his cheek, painting in swirls. He opened his eyes.

sam i'll be normal ward fucking cleaver i'll be anything you want come back

-o-

Shadows came, and he screamed at them to stay away from Sam, Mom, others. They'd come and go, waver like heat, dancing away from him only to circle back and whisper just out of reach.

please anyone come back any fucking one just one someone please come back

-o-

There was an open window. Dean couldn't imagine what Miss Manners would have to say about that. He turned his head and found Puck where he expected to, crouched beside him. The little creature's arms lay across his knees, and his forehead bent to lay in that cradle.

Words rose to Dean's lips, and he found breath to say them, which only pissed him off more. *Let me die in peace, you little fucker*, but then he saw the tattered fabric and recognized his sweater. A narrow, fragile wrist extended from the sleeve to droop in midair, and he remembered feather touches on his face.

Sitting up was a struggle. The room swam, and he closed his eyes, breathing through his nose to keep from puking. When he reopened them, Puck's head was up and his eyes quickly went from sleep to alert. Dean looked away and took stock. He lay on the same dirty floor, but with a thick blanket underneath him and another on top. From the scent, they'd been swiped from a barn somewhere; Dean would smell like horse for a while. Not that he needed the covers: the room's temperature hovered at a pleasant 70 degrees. Dean looked back at the window, and was not at all surprised to see snow drifting by outside.

He contemplated the thick flakes, then looked sideways. Puck hadn't

moved. “You’re pretty good,” Dean commented. His voice sounded like a sixty-year-old chainsmoker.

Puck blinked owlishly, and the same annoying part of Dean’s head that had noticed the sweater also noted the paleness and dark circles of exhaustion in Puck’s small face. Dean didn’t look away this time, and they regarded each other in silence.

Puck licked his dry, narrow lips. “I have pie.”

But his fingers faltered as they tried to unwrap the pastry. Eyes drooped, and Dean reached out to catch one narrow shoulder. Puck lurched upright at the contact, gripping the hand that held him.

“You stay,” he croaked weakly. His eyes still swam, but they found Dean and held him there.

Dean stared back, frozen in anger and helplessness. The annoying voice in his mind – *Sam* – informed him that however long he could last, however hard he could push himself, Puck could go further, and there would be even less of him left at the end.

“You stay.”

Dean swallowed – *shoulda just shot myself* – and croaked back, “All right.”

Despite his exhaustion, it took a while for Puck to unwind… or maybe he didn’t trust Dean. But finally he fumbled his way under the blanket that Dean held up and dropped like a boneless thing to the floor.

Just like that, heat went out of the room and Dean shuddered as cold and pain dug in. Despite his crawling anger, he huddled in close to Puck. Slender bones ground together as he shifted the smaller creature and slid an arm underneath. Repositioned, Dean stared at the ceiling. The head lying on his shoulder sighed and murmured a little in its sleep, and Dean could not hate him. The agonized rage of every new breath… but he could not quite bring himself to hate Puck for it.

Light across the ceiling waxed and waned, then waxed and waned again. As the second night crawled in, Puck spoke without raising his head. “Once you’re well enough, we’ll go on to New York.”

Maybe it was a deal – *just to New York, then you can do whatever* – or maybe it was a threat – *I’m not letting go, you can’t make me*.

Dean looked at the ceiling – *two ceilings, water and fire, and no one came back* – and whispered, “All right.”

-o-

They were another week in that little shack, curled up on the floor. Puck recovered quickly, and once he cranked the temperature back up with whatever magical thermostat, Dean crawled out and sat Indian-style on the blankets with him. Around them were arranged all of Puck’s strange tools, his candles and charms and silver cups, as well as two apple pies.

“Stole them,” Puck said, his eyes flashing guiltily. He had water bottles, too, and once they drank those, Puck went outside and refilled them with fresh snow. A thought stayed with Dean, though, and when Puck returned he asked, “So what exactly did you do for food before I introduced you to the wonders of pastries?”

Puck paused, standing above him, which wasn’t so much above as it was level… so damn small and skinny. He mumbled low enough that Dean didn’t hear it the first time. “Trash,” he finally said aloud, pale face colored something like shame. Dean thought of the woman in San Francisco and said nothing else.

Dean dozed, mostly, slipping in and out of sleep so heavy he wondered if that was part of Puck’s spell. When he woke, there were odd bits of food to eat and he’d stagger out the back door to piss, leaning against the corner of the house.

Finally, on the first weekend of April (and he only knew that because Puck told him), Dean woke up and shook off the haze, to greet a bright clear morning. It was still damn cold, and snow glistened in melting patches, half-blinding him when he joined Puck on the porch. The Nagumwasuck looked up at him in silence, his arms folded tight across his chest for warmth. Dean eased himself down to sit on the top step. His muscles felt stretched and tight at the same time; his knees literally creaked when he pulled them up and balance his elbows.

Outside the gray Earth stared back, met his gaze without kindness or warmth.

He wondered if he had talked in the midst of his fever delirium, if he had screamed out loud the pleas to *stay stay stay come back*. But then again, Puck could blow out bonfires and provide central heating with the force of his mind. He knew. Dean waited for anger or hatred, anything that would make this easier. Puck knew, could hear the

agonized prayers either spoken or not, and he heard also the silence in answer. The emptiness of the Earth's response to her son's broken appeal, as if creation had passed by this small shack and its occupants on the highway. Left them in the palm of this empty hand.

No one had answered. No one had stayed. No one had come back.

And still Puck sat, still as the Earth, still waiting. Dean wanted to hate him, to shatter that silent resolve with another death scream – *let me die, you little fucker*. But Puck knew that, too. He expected it, was braced for it, black eyes dull with the effort of keeping Dean alive despite sickness of the body and soul.

And Dean could not quite bring himself to fulfill that expectation.

"So what's the plan, little man?" Dean asked finally.

Puck's eyes flickered, but not with triumph. Dean's voice rang rough and hollow. He was a son of man, of the Earth, and for him the Earth had proven itself to be empty.

-o-

Dean almost laughed when he saw the train. "Well this is old-fashioned. I need a harmonica." Puck looked confused and Dean waved him off as they crouched beside the tracks. There was some intersection, away down the line somewhere, and the train's snaking body slowed to a crawl. Dean went first, hoisting himself up into an empty car, then reaching down to grab ahold of Puck's wrist. There was half a moment when he considered letting go, trying to escape. But then he felt the small bones and pulled the skinny body up.

The Southern Pacific railway took them to the Nevada-Utah border; the train stopped in the night and switched tracks, heading north away from the highway, and they jumped out, waited six hours in the dark for another train on the south fork.

Puck lit a fire from nothing and produced smashed Twinkies. Dean stood looking east, shivering as a thunderstorm moved on the horizon. A flash of light revealed white wastelands: the salt flats. Scorched earth, where nothing would grow.

He stood with his back to the fire and felt rather than heard Puck behind him. Puck knew. And he still held on, wordless, determined.

-o-

Puck's determination faltered when stop signs and sidewalks multiplied in their view from the train car's open side. Delicate fingers twisted in the sleeves of Dean's sweater as they rolled further and further into Salt Lake City. But he slid to the ground behind Dean, crouched low as they hurried between fork lifts and trucks. A few workers turned heads as they skittered past, but none seemed concerned. Not their problem.

Huge steeples stabbed into the sky atop the enormous Temple. Dean squinted in the noon sun, traced their leaping spires to the golden tips, then turned to look at Puck. The Nagumwasuck's stood a few feet away on the curb, staring across at the youth homeless shelter. The knuckles of his hands stood in neat white rows.

Dean wavered, and broke first. "I'll get us checked in. Stick on my back and keep your head down."

It came out harsher than he intended, but that didn't deter the look of relief and gratitude on Puck's face. He pulled the hood low over his face and followed Dean across the street.

Braced for the worst of scorn (or worse, pity), Dean felt a pang of surprise when the middle-aged lady with a clipboard looked him up and down, asked about twenty questions, took down his name, smiled, and nodded. "My name is Melinda," she said, and strode off to find them a room. Hand-drawn signs taped to the walls directed him down various halls to the cafeteria, sleeping commons, laundry room, library, and showers. Homemade Easter decorations covered the concrete walls, and colored paper lay on tables looking for new artists. A bin of donated clothes sat in the corner and Dean fished out a couple of sweaters and kid-sized jeans.

Puck stood against the wall beside him, head twitching at the closing of every door and shoulders moving quick with his breath. Only a few of the shelter's teenaged occupants wandered past on their way to the cafeteria, and none glanced in Puck's direction, but…

Dean wavered again. "Wait here a minute."

Puck's head came up and Dean could almost feel his panic crank up a notch. He flapped one hand – *it's okay, it's okay* – and headed back to the front desk, swiping a pair of scissors off the table as he went.

"Do you guys have any razors?" he asked the two teenaged volunteers there.

That brought some eyebrows up. Dean cursed mentally and pasted on his best I'm-totally-not-suicidal smile, raised a finger to touch his chin. "Jeremiah Johnson is not my best look."

The thin blonde cocked her head sideways, looked at her brother. They might as well have been relatives of Paul the Overly-Helpful Missionary. "You'll have to ask Melinda when she gets back," the brother said evenly. "No offense. We just find it best… to not give out sharp objects."

That explained the blunt kindergarten-style scissors in Dean's pocket. "'Kay, thanks."

"Michael?" It took half a second for Dean to register his assumed name, and an equal amount of time for Melinda to notice his delayed response. Her grey eyes flickered but she did not comment. "You and your brother mind sharing a room?"

The room turned out to be little more than a cubicle with two cots, a desk, and a Bible. Melinda nodded at the clothes in his hands but gave him a hard look when he repeated the request for a razor. Dean instinctively knew better than to repeat the Jeremiah Johnson crack, and held still under her gaze.

"We've had some incidents recently," she said in a low voice, scratchy with grief and guilt. "Kids doing things to themselves."

Dean returned her searching stare in silence. He would not, could not, deny the impulse.

Beside him, Puck fairly hummed with anxiety, and without thought or design or even looking in that direction Dean reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. It was an old instinct brought out by distraction and exhaustion. A brother thing worn like a groove into the mechanics of his motions. A Sam thing. He'd done it a hundred thousand times, tap an arm or flick an elbow to signal *dude, relax, it's okay*.

Underneath his hand, Puck stilled. Melinda's hard grey eyes flickered again and softened. She nodded once. "I'll see what we've got downstairs."

In the quiet of their room, Dean took his hand away and Puck reached up to push back his shielding hood. "Why do you want a razor?" His eyes held no uncertainty; he knew Dean better.

Dean handed over the kid-sized clothes, buying himself a moment to

think while Puck examined his new garments with puzzled delight. The scissors felt heavy in his pocket, laying the same question to him in silent scissor language. *Why do it, if all you want is to check out?*

He remembered feather touches on his face and had his answer.

-o-

Puck quailed at first. “No. No no. Nonononononono.”

Dean stood barefoot on the bathroom floor and tried not to think about the decade-old germs that could live in concrete. His skin felt weird and itchy after the shower, air moving over the bare skin of his chest and he couldn’t remember how long it’d been since he bathed properly. He’d stood underneath the hot water for twenty, thirty minutes, just standing, propped against the wall with both arms out and his eyes squeezed tight before ever reaching for soap.

Now, showered and stripped to second-hand boxers, he held the scissors in one hand and the razor in the other. “Dude, it’s freaking 3 am. Nobody’s going to come in, and I don’t wanna travel all the way to New York with a mini-Sasquatch.”

Puck flinched and Dean almost bit his lip, knowing that dig went a bit far. But he held resolute.

Puck danced back and forth, skinny arms wrapped around himself and eyes darting over the stalls, the countertops, the door, Dean the razor the scissors the stalls and back around again. Dean waited.

This time, Puck broke first, reluctantly peeling the sweater over his head and dropping it at his feet. Underneath the old jeans and D.A.R.E T-shirt fit him better than his previous ensemble, but looked highly incongruous with Puck’s scraggly caveman hair. Dean gestured at the jeans and T-shirt. “Those, too.”

That took another five minutes of convincing, but they finally joined the sweater on the floor. Dean tried not to look as he handed over a towel, but there was no missing the dirty, skeletal body underneath, like a bird stripped of all its feathers and pushed into mud. Puck wrapped himself up quickly, head bent to hide his face. A pink flush covered his shoulders and neck, but Dean stepped determinedly behind him and tilted Puck’s head upright with gentle fingers. And that, too, was a mechanical thing, a Sam thing. The two of them, standing in hotel bathrooms, Sammy squinting doubtfully through too-long bangs as Dean clipped away. It had been hell the first few times,

but practice made perfect and he'd gotten better by the time Sam was old enough to care about his looks.

Puck watched him doubtfully through way-too-long bangs and Dean swallowed, began clipping. The kindergarten scissors proved to be nigh-worthless, and Dean resorted to sawing at the tangled hair. Puck squawked as the first clump fell, but held still. Bit by bit, his shoulders, neck, and ears emerged; Dean wondered how long it'd been since any of them had seen the light of day. After the heavier stuff, the scissors came back into usefulness, and he made the lines as neat as possible, nothing fancy, straight across the neck, off the ears, a bit looser on top. Then he pushed Puck into a stall, closed the door and scooped up a small mountain of dirty hair while the Nagumwasuck showered.

When Puck came out, Dean found it difficult to breathe for a moment. Without the mass of hair, he looked even smaller, younger, like the kid they were pretending he was. Puck stared at him with wide eyes full of uncertain fear. Dean swallowed down the swell of emotion and touched his arm to guide him to the sink. Eyebrows were trickier and he should really have tweezers for this. But he snipped and shaved what he could, until the straight line of hair thinned into two still-thick but separate arcs.

And then he stepped back and Puck went very still, staring at himself in the mirror. He looked at Dean, looked back at the mirror, raised one finger to trace the line of his eyebrow down along the cheekbone then lifted to just barely touch the top of his shorn hair, like it was something fragile.

Dean stood next to him and didn't even try to breathe as Puck's face crumpled. "Thank you," he whispered, his little voice raw and echoing in the concrete bathroom. "Thank you."

Dean stared into the mirror, watching as Puck slid fingers over his own features, re-learning his face. He'd never be a looker… nose too big, eyes too small, so damn thin. Dean made a mental note to get breakfast early before the crowd hit, and force every piece of sausage, waffles, and cereal down Puck's throat he could manage. Then his eyes slid and his own reflection stared back at him. *Jesus*. He was one to talk. Unkempt hair and a beard hid some of his face, but he could see the hollows underneath where homelessness and pneumonia had eaten away muscle. It hadn't registered just how far he'd gone… starvation seemed such an outlandish phrase applicable to small foreign children and animals. Hunger had become so familiar that it

droned in the background, white noise that he could ignore with practice. And all the while his body had turned in on itself in desperation, leaving behind what he had to say with all grim honesty was a fair impersonation of the Unabomber.

Dean met Puck's gaze in the mirror. Tears shown on the Nagumwasuck's cheeks, but a sly look had come into his eyes. His lips turned upward and for a moment, he looked completely human, a boy of about twelve, colored dark and mischievous. A bit like his namesake.

"I'm the pretty one," Puck whispered.

Laughter echoed in the cold, barren bathroom, and Dean realized that it came from himself.

-o-

Whatever plans Dean had made for an early start pretty much fell apart upon waking. Afternoon light swam in through the blinds, and Dean would swear that Puck had put another snooze spell on him, except the little creature lay on his own cot, twisted up in a weird position but inarguably still asleep.

Dean sat up and groaned softly as weariness tugged at the edges. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten a full night's sleep, either, and his body seemed all too happy to remind him. Sore muscles now turned to outright weakness, and judging from the face and body he'd seen last night, he'd atrophied plenty.

It shouldn't matter. All through the winter, he'd pretended that he was just living out the scraps and loose ends of a life already ended. But he'd shaved last night and cut his own hair as best he could while Puck sat on the counter beside the sink in his jeans and tried to hide the tiny smile of delight. Dean wasn't sure what his efforts signified, whether it was defeat or defiance or if there was even a difference between the two. He passed a hand over his chest, felt the raised ribs. That would take longer to fix, and if he started down that path, then he would have to know… there could be no more waffling.

Waffling. *Waffles*. Dean groaned again, louder, and Puck twitched into awareness. "Mmmf?"

"Waffles," Dean pronounced, hauling himself upright. "Tell me you've had waffles before."

Puck's sleepy eyes widened. "Are those the circle things with the squares in them?"

"Bingo."

-o-

Atrophied muscles, loss of God-given good looks, and now, Dean discovered that the long winter had practically killed off his instincts, too. He'd eaten three plates of their seven-course meal before he noticed lowered voices, the tense volunteers. Chewing stuttered and paused, then resumed at a slower pace as his radar kicked in. Beside him, Puck bent low over his meal, still hunched out of habit, and ate so fast Dean seriously considered counting the silverware when they finished. Out of the dozen or so other kids enjoying a late lunch in the cafeteria, no one sat near the door; everyone had their heads down, hats pulled low. Cops, then. Maybe a gang incident in the building? No… this was Salt Lake City. Differing interpretations of the Gospels?

A side door up opened and Melinda came through, a faltering reflection of the woman he met yesterday. Dean focused on the slice of bacon, practically feeling his brain kick awake. In his peripheral vision, Melinda paused at the door, and maybe he imagined the feeling of her gaze sweep across him. Then came the click of her shoes, moving across to the front desk.

Dean waited as she passed, then raised his head to find his witnesses.

Most kept their heads down. But two tables over, a thin girl with dyed red hair and a crooked nose watched Melinda surreptitiously. She jumped in alarm when Dean slid into the seat across from her. "What's goin' on?" Dean asked, jerking his chin after the weary shelter manager.

A hard, flat look shown in the girl's eyes. Underneath the dye job, her hair shone blonde. "Kid upstairs killed himself," she said shortly, and went back to her eggs. *Fuck off*.

"How'd he do it?" he pressed, eyes on the front desk.

"Hung himself with bed sheets," she snapped. "Why don't you go ask them about it?"

He couldn't charm this one – had a definite "girls only" vibe to her. Dean retreated, but saw her glance at him as he went.

“What’s wrong?” Puck asked when Dean sat back down.

“Dunno, probably nothing.” Dean waved it off easily, but as he raised his fork, his eyes lifted too, watching Melinda and the girl.

-o-

Sideways questions and eavesdropping led him to a room exactly like his own, except for the police tape and torn sheets. Puck stood just inside the door, worrying his sweater while Dean moved around the small bedroom.

Whatever hibernation his instincts had gone into, they woke up now. The hairs on his arms stood on end as he craned his neck to study the ceiling fan and the dangling remains of an innocuous sheet made deadly with desperation. Or Something Else, if the goosebumps on his arms were any indication, and he carefully unfolded a battered duffel bag at the foot of the bed. Clothes, shampoo, an old Walkman, condoms, lube… gay, probably kicked out by his family. A couple pictures showed a smiling brown-haired boy with several other men, striking poses, sometimes in drag.

Dean glanced upward again, at the ragged cloth hanging from the ceiling fan.

Probably nothing, just another troubled youth destroyed by his own family. And the others… well, a place like this had a high concentration of the suicidal types. But Dean took the Walkman as they slipped out the door. It was tricky work without proper tools, but he took it apart with a butter knife while Puck read the newspaper. There had been three others in two weeks, the paper reported, and the shelter might be shut down.

Puck sat cross-legged on the bed, watching Dean with wide eyes. “You think?”

Dean sat back, eyeing his construction. “We’ll see,” he grunted. “Probably nothing.”

He didn’t know what to do with the little spurt of pride he felt when the Walkman squealed at the door. He stood in the threshold, moving it carefully in and out of the room. The EMF whine fluctuated as it passed the doorjamb. Definitely Something Else.

His shadow stood watching intently. “How ‘bout you, you picking up on… anything?” Dean waved his hand at the room.

Puck frowned, shook his head, and a bit of short hair fell onto his forehead. He tucked it back, a tic he'd already developed. "It doesn't work that way."

"Then how does it work?"

Puck shrugged in the over-large sweater. "It's not threatening you. At least, not right now," he added, glancing past Dean into the room.

Dean eyed him, something clicking into place mentally. "So anything you can or can't do depends on me?"

Puck's eyes stayed on the room; Dean knew without looking that his attention hung on the ceiling fan and its grisly ornaments. "Something like that. I need a focus point. A hunter." He dropped his head, shrugged again. "At least… I think. I don't – I don't think I'm quite right. The elders, they always said that I should never have been born. I can't see the things I should." His eyes shone bright when they came back up, and he wouldn't look at Dean. "I – a real Nagumwasuck, a good one, could look in here and tellyoueverything you needed to know. But I'm half human and – wrong." He sucked in a breath, and pulled his thin lips upward into a small smile. "I'm kinda useless. Sorry."

The smile held such sadness, mourning for a life lost at birth. Dean didn't even hesitate this time, just reached out and poked a skinny arm. Puck jumped, and Dean smiled lopsidedly. "Hey, man, you're here. I don't see any of them hanging around to help."

Puck huffed a little laugh and rolled his shoulders, embarrassed. Watching his face, Dean thought about that shack in Nevada, the weight of a small head on his shoulder and the tight grip of an arm around his waist, holding on. Clinging to the one thing that gave it purpose, meaning.

Something hissed in the air, lightning-quick. Dean swept out without thinking and lifted Puck straight off the floor with an arm around his waist. Small hands closed on his shoulder as the door to the room slammed shut, smashing into the space they had occupied half a second before. The Walkman shrieked and Dean yanked headphones from his ears with a curse.

He stood in the hallway, tense for another attack. Puck's shoes banged against his knee and his breath came fast in Dean's ear.

"How 'bout now?" Dean murmured without taking his eyes off the

door.

“Ghost,” Puck whispered shakily. “A young one. It – he took his own life. And… and the others are there, too. He drove them to it.”

His fingers gripped Dean with surprising strength. “Now who the hell said you’re useless?” Dean eased him down, careful to keep himself between Puck and the door. “Just this room?”

“No,” Puck answered, but he didn’t need to. The hissing sound rose again, rose and rose above them until it slid along the ceiling. Puck ducked low, pressed against Dean’s side. If Dean watched closely, he could see a faint tremor in the air, like a heat wave, that crossed above him… and slithered into the doorway to his right.

“Shit,” Dean swore, and pounded on the door. *No rock salt, no holy water, nothing…*

The door came open sharply, and Dean was greeted by the sight of pissed-off dark eyes and flame-red hair. *Shit.*

“What the fuck do you want?” The girl from the cafeteria glared hard tinged with fear. “I got mace, man.”

“Smart move, keep it up. Did you know this guy across the way?” Dean jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the police tape.

She looked past him and her face changed, got both harder and softer in the same moment. “Talked to him a couple of times.” She was about two seconds from shutting the door.

Puck stepped around Dean, small and dark. Still freaked, but resolute. “We didn’t know him. But we want to know what happened. My name’s Puck, and this is Dean.”

The girl stared down at the fragile hands and mismatched features, then slowly stepped back out of the doorway. “Kim. C’mon in, I guess.”

Dean suppressed a smile, remembering all the times Sam’s mophead had gotten them free meals. That trick had never worked for *him*, of course, but that was beside the point. Inside, the girl folded her arms and leaned on the doorway to the bathroom. “I dunno what you guys want… I only met the dude two days ago, in the laundry room.”

Dean was pretty sure he could still hear the hiss, moving in the walls

like a snake in the air ducts. “Uh-huh. How’d he seem then, upset?”

“No,” she said sharply. “What are you guys, cops?” But she looked at Puck and her suspicion eased a bit.

“What’d you guys talk about?”

“Stuff. We were both born in Ogden, got kicked out by our parents.” A lip curl masked old pain. “Mostly we talked about LGBT centers, places for kids like us to go.”

“And he didn’t seem upset about anything when you talked?” Dean had to get her out of this room, and quick. Preferably without getting a face full of mace.

“Naw, not at all. He was actually pretty happy: this guy in Denver wanted Brian to move in. He was on his way there, just passing through.” An especially pronounced hiss echoed from the wall beside Kim and she banged on it without looking. Puck jumped about a foot. “Fucked up heater system.”

“You said you saw him a second time?” Dean asked. Out of his peripheral vision, the air tremor leaked out of a vent just above the bed.

“Yeah… the night he died. I was coming up from the cafeteria, saw him in the hallway.” She frowned. “He was just… standing there outside his room, with this weird look on his face. Kinda blank. I asked him if something was wrong, if the Denver deal had fallen through or something.”

“What’d he say?”

Kim shrugged. “That it was hot. Which didn’t make any sense, ‘cause the heater in this place is…” Her voice stumbled and trailed off as she finally followed Dean’s gaze and caught sight of the freakish black shadow hanging over her bed.

For a second, no one moved. The ghost hovered in the air, hissing softly, more of a cloud than a walking shade.

“Oh, hi,” Dean said to it, and waved.

-o-

They barely made it out of the room, and Kim sprinted away without

a backward glance, backpack bouncing as she ran. “You’re welcome!” Dean called after her, holding his shoulder where a lamp had struck him at mach speed.

“Lemme see.” Puck’s thin fingers peeled back Dean’s, and he winced. “It’s a good thing you ducked in time.”

“Yeah,” Dean responded distractedly, and he had. He’d seen it coming just like the door and responded instinctively. Which meant that his first instinct was still survival. Which meant a whole lot of things, none of which he wanted to think about at the moment. “Any idea where it’s heading?”

Puck’s hands stilled, and he squinted at the door. “It’s not in the room anymore. I think – I think it’s gone back to wherever it – goes.”

Dean gave his shoulder an experimental shake. “We gotta find the bones, burn ‘em.” He took off down the hall at what Sam had always called his ‘business walk.’ Puck trotted alongside.

“Where are we going to look?”

“Well, it’s not gonna be anywhere nice, that’s for damn sure.”

-o-

Twenty minutes later, Dean ducked his head and peered through a tangled cobweb of rusty pipes and… well, cobwebs. “Basement,” he muttered. “Always the basement. Can’t anyone hide a body in, like, the foyer?”

Soft footsteps scuffled to a stop behind him. “I brought the salt,” Puck reported breathlessly. “I think Melinda saw me take it, but she didn’t stop me.”

Dean took the container of table salt from his companion’s shaking hands. “You think she ran into Kim?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t see her.”

“Okay.” Dean took stock of his tools: a five-pound back of salt nicked from the kitchen, a Zippo lighter, a bottle of lamp oil, the knife from his would-be mugger in San Fran, and a makeshift shovel constructed from a metal folding chair. *Fan-fucking-tastic.* “Okay, stay behind me and lemme know the second you pick up on anything.”

Puck closed his hand around a fistful of Dean's shirt as they moved cautiously forward into the basement's murky depths. The light from the stairs faded quickly, and Dean clicked on one of the Zippos. "Look for uneven ground," he whispered softly to the outline of Puck's dark head, and bent low.

This… this felt familiar. Comfortable, even. For all that he complained Dean far preferred basements to attics, where bodies rotted in the open air. Buried bodies were harder to get to, but the above-ground variety raised extra hairs on his neck and usually had more violent hauntings. It seemed like a more unnatural sin than murder to keep bones from rest, to keep them from returning to the Earth. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*, and all that.

As he swiped aside a cobweb, Dean thought distractedly, *Not that the below-ground varieties are un-fucked-up.* They left blemishes in the Earth, telltale disturbances of dirt where something had been forced back into the Earth's flesh. Festering wounds just waiting for him to come along and pull them open…

Dean stopped short and Puck ran into his back.

In the trembling flame of a lighter, deep below ground in the basement of a youth homeless shelter in Utah, the Earth answered its wandering son. It did not speak of love or forgiveness, or family members returning to his side. It did not promise joy or peace to him. It showed him its wounds… all its lost children wandering as ghosts, the shadows of demons lurking at its edges, snarling teeth in the night that threatened creatures of the day. And it asked for healing.

In the half-light, the burden of it fell down on top of him. Dean drew a shaky breath and felt Puck beside him, heard his unspoken query. But he could not speak around the terrible weight that was growing in his chest, bound to his flesh. Sweat stood out on his face and he swiped at it harshly. The air seemed suddenly hot, and he craned his neck upward to seek the heat's source. Above him criss-crossed the large metal tubing of the shelter's heating system. Dean thought of the vents and *he said it was hot* and looked down.

At his feet was a small mound of Earth. Dean swallowed hard, knelt beside the infected scar, and went to work.

Puck held the Zippo in both hands as Dean dug into the hard soil. He quickly abandoned the folding chair and burrowed with his hands, loosening up the dirt with a few stabs of the knife first. It was enough,

though, and soon dirty white bones lay exposed to the air. *Probably been down here five, maybe six years…*

The light wavered and Puck whispered, "Dean." He was staring back the way they'd come. Dean spun quickly, but instead of a black cloud he found a flashlight beam that rose up and blinded him.

"You boys come out of there now," Melinda's voice said evenly.

"Look – Melinda. There are bones back in here." He moved aside to let her see. "We need to – "

"You don't need to do anything," she interrupted. "The police will take care of it. I've already called them."

"No you haven't," Puck said in a low voice.

Dean tensed, looking from the crouched Nagumwasuck and his flame to the round-faced woman and her flashlight. Both were absolutely still, staring at each other.

"I didn't kill him," Melinda whispered faintly. "I didn't – he… he did it himself. I was afraid… they were already talking about closing down the shelter back then…"

Puck met Dean's eyes. His were wide. "We need to hurry," he whispered.

Above them in the pipes, something thumped and burst free. The flashlight beam bobbled and then dropped, the lighter went out, and Melinda screamed in the abrupt darkness. Dean lunged forward, scrabbling blindly to lift the table salt and pour half of it over the bones. Behind him Melinda went on screaming, and there were crashes that sounded suspiciously like a body being thrown against walls. Dean cursed under his breath, hands flailing for the lamp oil.

Melinda's screaming cut off abruptly, and Dean spun, shouted without thinking, "*Get the fuck away from her, Casper!*"

Brilliant idea, that. He felt a hard whoosh of hot air hit his face, and it hissed above him. Dean crouched low, blind and helpless. Then, like a light switch, a soft white illumination sprang up and filled the air with delicate light. The spirit loomed above him massed for attack and Dean twisted wildly for a weapon. He had half a second to register the sight of Puck staring in open-mouthed incredulity at his own glowing hand before the spirit hissed and rushed down.

Dean's fingers closed around the packet of table salt and he threw it without thinking. It flew upward straight into the ghost's form and… connected. Dean did some open-mouthed staring of his own as the previously-insubstantial spirit shattered around the salt's impact, slithering away into the darkness in pieces.

"Holy shit," he said into the sudden silence. Or near-silence: somewhere distantly in the basement, the hissing rose again, and Puck choked, "Dean, hurry it's – "

Lamp oil, douse, lighter, *foom*. Puck still glowed like a confused Christmas ornament and in the darkness Melinda moaned in pain, but the hissing stopped.

Beneath him, the Earth hummed its love. Dean lay flat on his back and didn't know whether to kiss the dirt or stab it a couple more times.

-o-

They managed to get Melinda upstairs to the waiting arms of her frightened teenaged followers. They didn't stick around to see how much of the truth she'd admit to; Dean stole Melinda's satchel out of her office, upended its contents, and stuffed it full of all the clothes and food he could find. Payment. Whatever.

Puck ran hard at his shoulder as they slipped out the back door to avoid sirens. He hadn't stopped whispering since they'd gotten out of the basement. "I made Light, Dean!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "The elders, they – but I – I made Light! I've never – "

Dean grabbed him by the back of the shirt and hauled him into an alley as a police car sped by. "You're not glowing anymore, are you? 'Cause we could really use some darkness about now."

"No… no I'm not." Puck stared at his hand. "Maybe I can't do it again."

He looked so genuinely distressed that Dean paused, cuffed him on the shoulder. "'Course you will. You're the best Nagum… Nagumwhatever around. Now let's get the hell out of town before the Mormons get us."

-o-

It was only a while later that Dean recalled another bit of inexplicable luck from the basement. "Did you make the spirit disappear like that?"

Puck blinked sleepily, wedged between Dean's shoulder and the side of the pickup. They'd hitched a ride with a couple of new-age-types heading to Denver. They yodeled country songs up in the cabin; Dean and his "little brother" were packed in the cabin along with several dozen antique rocking chairs and heavy wool blankets.

"No," Puck murmured, and re-settled his cheek against Dean's arm. "We can't… never attack. Never hurt things. Musta… mustabeen the salt."

Dean watched Puck's small eyelids flutter shut, wheels turning in his head. Plans being formulated. Outside, the Earth spun on, devoid of one more festering wound, one among thousands. He thought of the brown-haired boy who would have been going to Denver himself, if he had lived. He thought of Kim, who *would* live, and tell her grandchildren about black shadows and two weirdos she met that one time in Utah. He even thought about Melinda, who would hopefully lay her guilt to rest along with the bones.

Nothing had changed. Everything he had lost, stayed lost.

But still the Earth whispered and all her children moved across her flesh, vulnerable to the shadows. And finally, for the first time, Dean began to listen and to hear.

And that was the end of the 763rd day.

Chapter 6: The 899th Day: La Belle Dame Sans Merci

The 899th Day: La Belle Dame Sans Merci

The snowball rolling around in Dean's head got big enough that just over the border, they hopped out of the pickup with a couple of blankets and sandwiches pressed on them by the hippie den mother. She waved gently to her 'two young wanderers' as the pickup pulled away towards Denver. The town they found themselves in was called Dinosaur. It had obviously been founded by someone high on peyote: every street echoed the town's name. Brontosaurus Blvd, Brachtosaurus Bypass, Antrodemus Alley… and cutting down the heart of town, Stegosaurus Freeway, branching south.

Beside Dean, Puck was bright red and shaking. Dean snorted once and they both went, doubled over. A Winnebago puttered by with four snot-nosed kids staring out the windows at the two maniacs lying flat on the ground laughing helplessly. Dean waved.

"Who," Puck gasped into Dean's shoulder, "who – who *are* these people?"

"I don't know," Dean replied between snorts, "but we'd better get out of here *fast*. The crazy might be contagious."

They choked on laughter the rest of the way through town, following I-64 South, away from the highway that would have taken them to Denver and New York. Puck didn't bother to hide his happiness anymore, eyes flashing, practically skipping under the cool Spring sun. The hood of his sweater flopped loose and forgotten on his shoulders.

Dean walked slower, still working it out in his head. There was a locker in Durango, down south where he and John had stayed for that month after – after Arizona. They'd left supplies there, some money. And weapons.

He and Puck paused on the roadside just past the turnoff for Plateosaurus Place and ate the organically-grown, non-meat-or-dairy sandwiches the hippies had given them. Dean had always prided himself on being a human garbage disposal but after a few bites into weird vegetables he thrust the thing distastefully at Puck and went back to munching on their bag of pork rinds. Puck didn't seem to mind: so far he'd eaten everything he touched with voracious delight.

Mid-chew, another thought that had been bouncing around in Dean's head came to the surface. "Did you know ahead of time that the ghost was there in Utah?"

Puck coughed and almost choked. He took a long while to swallow and washed down the big mouthful with Pepsi. "Not… exactly." He worried his lower lip and glanced at Dean out of the corner of his eye. "I knew kids were dying in that shelter, that there was something wrong." He paused and pressed his mouth together. "Are you mad?"

"Naw." Couldn't rightly get pissed about being manipulated into saving people's lives. "Do you think you could do it again, though? I mean, would you know where to look for something else?"

Realization dawned and Puck nodded, his eyes lighting up. "Sure."

Dean popped a pork rind in his mouth. There were the weapons and enough money to get a small car waiting for them down in Durango. Equipment and transportation, and now he had a guide. Something shifted internally; a weight that had been off-balance suddenly settled. Dean stood up, dusted off his jeans. He still had a ways to go physically, of course… *might as well get started on that right away.*

"C'mon, dude." Dean nudged Puck's leg lightly with a foot. "Hop on my back, I'll give ya a ride till we get picked up."

-o-

Durango took a week. The locker turned out to be a bit of a disappointment: neither as much money nor as many weapons as he'd hoped. Nevertheless, Dean pocketed a few shotgun shells, carried them to their hotel room. While Puck watched curiously (eating his second helping of chicken pot pie), Dean pried the shell open, dumped out its contents and replaced the buckshot with salt. Reconstructed, the shell felt warm as Dean rolled it around his palm, tossed it up in the air and caught it again. He met Puck's eyes, smiled.

"Need you to find me a ghost."

Puck, wide-eyed and solemn, nodded.

Transportation was harder. Dean walked from dealership to dealership until he gave up, got a motorcycle instead of a car. It had a compartment under the second seat that fit most of the smaller weapons, but he had to leave behind a couple of machetes and a rifle. A pair of sawed-off shotguns fit with some effort; the ammo joined

their blankets and fresh food supply in the satchel on Puck's back. Dean kept the salt-filled round in his pocket like a promise.

In the motorcycle shop, Dean paused and ran his fingers lightly across the second-hand leather jackets. Practicality warred with… something else and he lifted one out, eyed it.

"Good in a crash," commented the clerk behind the counter. He spat tobacco juice into a cup. "Extra layer of protection."

Dean thought with a pang of his other jacket left behind in the Impala. It had been a genuine Harley Davidson, black, silver zippers, fit like a glove. This dark brown jacket was a bit too broad in the shoulders, too long in back, some off-brand. Still, the cool leather felt good under his hands. He shrugged into it, let it fall around him, and checked himself out in the mirror. Another Dean stared back, hair still too long and a bit more stubble than was fashionable. And there were things in the eyes, jagged shards that hadn't yet been worn down. But they would be: the pieces he needed were all there, they just required some smoothing and polish to fit.

He ran another hand over the front of the jacket. Still on the light side by about twenty pounds; he'd grow into the shoulders. And the length would hide weapons pretty well, come to think of it. Puck stood beside the counter, a pair of sunglasses perched on his nose. He held out another pair wordlessly and Dean couldn't help but grin.

They split Durango the next day. Puck sat at his back, arms wrapped around Dean's middle. Air whistled past their ears as they sped East towards the sun. Maybe it was Dean's imagination, but he heard whispers on the wind and felt his lips curl upward into a tight smile.

-o-

Didn't take long to find a ghost in Texas: all those Old West towns had long histories and many graves. Puck, using invisible Spidey-sense, found a nasty one that had ingenious and grisly ways to kill locals via strangulation. Some wrongly-hanged spirit out for payback, who reacted to Dean's interference with a high shriek of hatred. Then it exploded outward like a dust cloud.

The shotgun's recoil left Dean with a bloody nose – *Jesus, my arms are so fucking weak!* – but the teenager clawed the phone cord from around her neck, coughing, and Puck raised his head. Dean grinned at him through the blood pouring down his chin. "Hell yeah."

-o-

Starting from near-zero turned out to be a bit easier than he'd expected. 'Course, when you haven't got much to begin with… and he had fewer people to worry about now, but he always shut down that thought in a hurry, quarantined it. Did situps and pushups on hotel room floors until his muscles ached and he slept soundlessly.

One valuable thing he'd gotten from the locker in Durango was the key to a post office box in Little Rock. It yielded several credit card applications, and soon Dean blossomed with identities. There was also a letter from Father Jim and two post cards from Bobby, one that read "WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU PEOPLE???" and another "IF NOT DEAD, PLEASE RESPOND. FUCKERS." Dean started to put these back in the box, then paused. He went around to the front desk, bought a cheap card with an inspirational message on the front. Inside he drew a □, mailed it back to Bobby with no return address, and snickered all the way to the car. Knowing Bobby, he'd probably flip out and perform an exorcism on the envelope.

It took about two weeks for the credit cards to come back and in the meantime a southern summer brewed. Dean jogged in the evenings, feet slapping against pavement that bled the day's heat. He wound aimless paths through the city and in four days he knew every pool hall and underground poker joint in town.

He also found a few other important points of interest and returned to their hotel room one night with a grin. Puck sat enraptured by the Home Shopping Network, a bag of pretzels in his lap. He waved one salt-encrusted bite at the screen as Dean walked in. "Do people actually *buy* these figurines? They're – they're horrifying! Big freakish eyes, all glazed over and… what?"

Dean held up the small baggie. "Brownies."

Puck blinked, then perked. "Chocolate?"

Dean's grin got a little bigger. "Something like that."

Five hours, four brownies and a massive joint later, Dean stood on one of the beds and wrapped his arms around Puck's waist, trying to pull him loose from the ceiling fan. "But the *flowers*, Dean!" Puck moaned, reaching for the floral print on the ceiling. "The *flowers!*"

With a *chunk* the fan lurched partly free from the plaster. Dean landed on the floor, Puck cradled to his chest. "Oof! Okay, you are officially

cut off, little dude."

"Not little." Puck squirmed free, but did not go back for the wallpaper. Staring dreamily at the fingernails of his right hand, he shuffled over to a chair by the window and flopped into it. "Not little, not little…"

Dean rolled over on his stomach and Army-crawled his way to the still-smoking joint. "Must be one hell of an optical illusion, then," he said after a moment, blowing smoke upward.

"Not little!" Puck pronounced earnestly. "I'm bigger 'n' you. Older, much muchmuch older."

Dean propped his head up on one arm and considered his odd companion. They'd bought nicer clothes for Puck, too: pair of jeans from the junior department and a Led Zeppelin T-shirt. He sat with his knees drawn up and his head lolled easily to one side, smiling without any hint of reservation. Without shadows or sharp edges, open, bright and full of love.

Dean smiled back – *how could he not?* – and stubbed the joint out in the ashtray. "C'mon, little dude. There's a *Star Trek* marathon on Sci-Fi."

"Ohhhh, I love *Star Trek*!" Puck hefted himself up, staggered over, tripped on some discarded clothes, and flopped onto the bed nearest the TV.

"Have you ever actually seen *Star Trek*?"

"No… but I'm sure I'll love it."

Later, with Puck's head resting on his arm and Kirk kissing the green girl, a comfortable haze shrouded Dean. Shadows danced on the edges of his vision and they whispered to him still. But they stayed far enough in their corners that he could blame them on the television's flickering glow. Memories, echoes of a life he'd fucked up beyond repair. *Not mine anymore, not mine, not me* and he shivered, held Puck a little closer.

-o-

When the cards came back Dean and Puck both got proper haircuts. Puck didn't like it, still jumpy around other people, but not leaping straight out of his skin at least. Dean held perfectly still under the barber's scissors and ran a hand through the short-cropped hair

afterwards. Shorter than he'd ever worn it.

They headed for Florida, chasing reports of a swamp monster that Dean suspected was actually a will 'o the wisp. He was right on that guess and handled it easily; he did not, however, anticipate the enormous alligator that rose up out of the dark water. The reports had mentioned large teeth in addition to dancing lights, but somehow he'd thought that a little farfetched. *Supernatural creature, check; Mother Nature, not so much*, Dean thought as the long jaw split open and rows of teeth blossomed.

Only a sudden beam of light erupting from behind him and going straight into the gator's eyes saved Dean. "Out!" Puck shrieked, wading in to his knees and holding his neon hand up.

"Out!" Dean shouted back at him, more alarmed at the sight of Puck's legs in water than the roar of air and snap of teeth just a few feet behind him.

A brighter, whiter light shown on the whole scene. "Put your hands above your head!" ordered a bullhorn.

In the brightness, the alligator thrashed wildly. Dean groped in his pocket, twisted mid-stride, and saw teeth. "Smile, you sonofabitch," he snarled, and threw. The grenade, a lovely little number he'd purchased from some backwater dealer with no teeth, flew straight into the gator's gaping maw.

Later, lying in a water-and-reptile-entrails-soaked heap with Puck, Dean commented breathlessly, "We may need some practice with that."

They had plenty of it. Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, a werewolf in Wisconsin and those damn water nymphs in Michigan (who looked rather surprised to see him again). They stayed in the warmer climates, lasting out the summer's heat. Dean did pushups until he could fire the sawed-off with one hand, jogged until he could run, ran until he could sprint. And if memories still swam at the edges, if he ever wondered why he never steered the bike towards Arizona or North Carolina or California, or why in some tired moments he looked over at Puck and saw hazel eyes and brown hair… well.

It had taken him a couple of days to get comfortable on the bike: even the slightest wiggle of the handlebars could throw off its passengers. Humor worked pretty much the same way, a quick comment or

sideways smile to throw everything off and leave him the one in control. It wasn't anything new to him, he'd joked his way out of high school counselor's offices and evaded social services with a smirk when bruises raised eyebrows. But like everything else, he honed it, made it smooth and sharp. He hustled pool a lot more, too, got vicious good at it. Before it had been a casual, easy thing, *but when I became a man, I put childish things away*, and there was no room in him for easy or casual. Except on one account.

Puck filled out on a steady diet of anything and everything, no longer a skeletal shadow. He actually disliked *Star Trek* (Shatner's hair scared him), but he loved Animal Planet, could watch *Animal 911* with teary eyes for hours at a time. He was either fantastic or terrible to have around while questioning people, depending on whether Dean was an innocuous passerby or a federal agent. After a few false starts, he learned how to quickly fade into the background while Dean flashed a badge, or stick close and be the wide-eyed baby brother. Waiting in a deserted barn for a storm to clear (and that was the sucky part of riding a bike), he showed Dean how to draw Anasazi protection symbols in the dirt. He collected postcards everywhere they went, kept them in a plastic bag like precious objects. After a while, Dean began to use them as a kind of journal, jotting down info about the werewolf on a "Green Bay – Land of Cheese!" card.

Between hunts Dean introduced Puck to foosball, sweet and sour pork, and regular showers. The Nagumwasuck took to everything with delighted curiosity, face so open that it hurt Dean someplace deep inside, someplace buried.

-o-

They got through the summer before Dean finally acknowledged to himself that he was running and made it to the first weekend in September before his pursuit caught up. It happened so uneventfully that he didn't freak out or anything. Perfectly calm, *well, and the shit finally hits the fan*. One minute he and Puck had their eyes on a burning house and the next Caleb stood three feet away from him, staring hard.

Dean took one breath in and pushed it out.

"Jesus Christ," Caleb said clearly and Dean couldn't tell if it was an exclamation or a test.

"Naw," Dean said back, his voice steadier than granite, "martyrdom

really ain't my thing. How the hell you been, Caleb?"

"How have I been. How have I been." Caleb's mouth worked for a moment, his face turning red.

Dean suddenly remembered the crowd of civilians, cops and firefighters milling around them and he interrupted whatever Caleb was trying to choke out. "Dude, I realize you probably can't wait to kick my ass, but hold off on Hulking out till we're someplace quieter."

Caleb's mouth clamped shut. Dean took that as an affirmative and reached without looking, drew Puck to his side and took off through the crowd. He saw Caleb blink at the Nagumwasuck, felt Puck twist to look up, anxious and searching. Dean did not return either gaze, but tightened his hand on Puck's shoulder.

He found them a little alley bordered on either side by a gas station and a high hedge. Des Moines wasn't exactly a small town but then, neither was the fire, and three people standing in an alley would be overlooked. Caleb seemed to have recovered some of his self-control and normal color. He jerked his chin back towards the sound of sirens. "That you?"

"Oh – that. Yeah. Nasty worm-thing in the basement." He sketched a shrug and felt Puck's eyes on him. "The family was raising it, so I figure, kill two birds with one stone. Light it up, give the Waldens a little moral lesson."

"By burning their house down?"

"Oh, and they also killed old people for worm-food," Dean added mildly.

Caleb opened his mouth and closed it again. "Were they inside?" he inquired after a moment.

"Naw, cops got 'em. Apparently they did this sorta thing back in Cincinnati, too."

"I tracked them from Cincinnati."

"Well there you go." Dean smiled with the left side of his mouth and leaned against the restaurant's concrete side.

"Jesus, Dean… we all thought you were dead." Caleb glanced again at Puck. "Who're you?"

“I’m Puck.” He looked for Dean’s nod then stuck out a small hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Caleb took the offered hand slowly. “Caleb. We sticking to first names?”

Puck blinked. “Haven’t got a last one.”

Caleb accepted that with a nod, didn’t ask any follow-ups. Dean recalled why he’d always liked the man: a narrowed glance told him that Puck was something other than *homo sapiens* and he let it pass just as quickly, no questions or fuss. *Our line of work…* “So, you gonna kick my ass or what?” Dean inquired.

Caleb gave him an appraising look. “Don’t know if I could. You’re looking pretty damn good for a dead man.”

“Well, eat my veggies, moisturize every day…”

The older hunter laughed, but sobered. “Seriously, though, Dean… your Dad’s looking for you.”

Dean opened his mouth. Nothing came out. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

His silence didn’t go unnoticed. Caleb studied him carefully. “We all had you and John written off as dead… a year with no word from either of you. Father Jim had heard from Sam a couple times,” Dean’s stomach lurched, “when John called Theresa up out of the blue last month. Asked if anybody had seen you. He didn’t say much, just asked her to put the word out. … but she got the impression that you two had a falling out.”

In the late August heat, Dean’s skin felt cold. “Somethin’ like that.”

“Well… Lord knows none of us want to get in the middle of a Winchester War Zone.”

Dean shifted, rocked backward. The corner of the building dug into his back painfully and Puck still watched. “But?”

“But I did say that I’d call if I heard anything.”

A siren screamed past. Dean smiled. “Better get outta town, Caleb. That’s one hell of a fire. Bound to be questions.”

“Yeah. Right.”

-o-

They waited until Caleb's pickup turned east before Dean gunned the motorcycle hard.

That night Dean did calisthenics until his muscles seized up and he lay on the floor panting. Puck had some version of *Law & Order* turned down low. Neither spoke.

-o-

When they got to Nebraska, Dean checked the storage bin in Lincoln. It'd been nearly cleaned out. In the middle of all that empty concrete floor sat a cell phone and a note. "DEAN, PLEASE CALL. – DAD." The phone had a "Dad" entry, as well as numbers for everyone else who'd ever hunted with them or given them aid. All those years of complaining about modern technology, and John had gone and bought them a Mobile-to-Mobile family plan.

Dean forced himself not to run as he left the storage facility; John's face seemed to move in every shadow.

That night John messaged the phone. "PLS CALL." He didn't call himself, though, not then and not in the days afterwards. The messages came regularly, maybe twice a week, but he did not call. Dean deleted all the messages and did pushups.

-o-

Apparently John had also given Dean's number out to everyone else, too, because a week later while they were refueling in a gas station outside of Lincoln the cell rang. Dean, staring at the caller ID, couldn't help but smile.

"Hello, Theresa."

"You little motherfucking *pissant prick*."

Dean leaned against the Impala's door, smiling to himself as the profanity continued for about another five minutes. When she paused for breath, he slid in, "I'm fine, Mother Theresa, how're you?"

"*Don't call me that you SMALL-DICKED HALFWIT.*"

Her voice broke alarmingly on the last syllable and Dean's smile slipped. They sat in mutual silence while she got ahold of herself

again. “Thought you were dead,” she said gruffly after a while.

“Sorry,” Dean whispered, feeling the fractures spread.

She sighed then thankfully slid back into her best drill sergeant tones. “Useless crazy fuckers, all three of you. You used to be the sane one, but after this little stunt, well fuck you, too.”

Dean relaxed a bit at the safer territory. “What do you need?”

“What the fuck makes you think I need something?”

“You always insult people when you need something.”

She conceded that point with a grunt. “There’s a succubus nest in Georgia. Big motherfucking one.”

“The one in Atlanta? Dad and I went through there, cleared it out two years ago.”

“Yeah, and so did Caleb six months ago. Apparently you fuckers can’t get it right.”

Dean paused, smiled. “You had a crack at it, didya?”

She paused, too. “Fuck you.”

“How bad is it?”

“We’ve only been pecking on the surface. Everyone keeps taking out satellite nests, but the main den – well, let’s put it this way: you remember that one in New York?”

“Yeah?”

“Cake.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. This is gonna need more than two hands, Dean. How soon can you get to my place?”

The gas station’s neon lights buzzed above him. Puck stood out by the roadway, head tilted back, staring upward at the stars. He turned to Dean in the moonlight, too far away to hear. Dean smiled back.

“Dean.”

“You called my dad?”

Her voice came staccato like gunshots. “Yes I have called your fucking dad, and yes I am aware that you two are having *issues*,” she said it like a dirty word, “but I am not Dr. Phil and we are not emo-angst-bullshit teenagers. We are hunters, Dean. People have died; if we do not do our job, more people will die. So whatever shit is going on between the two of you, I suggest you not let it interfere with your ability to pull a fucking trigger.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Mother Theresa,” Dean replied, keeping his tone light. “Can you overnight the info to our St. Louis box?”

“Done. What’s your ETA?”

Dean hung up.

-o-

In the night semi-trucks ground their gears together, their headlights tracing arcs of light across the ceiling. Dean followed the life of each shooting star from birth to death in shadows. After 3 am he rose silently, pulled the duffel bag from under his bed.

Puck lay twisted in weird pretzel-shape sleep, one arm draped across his head and the other hand intertwined with his toes. Dean stood over him for a long moment in the dark wearing his jacket, bag slung over one shoulder.

We are hunters, Dean.

He bent and pressed a kiss to the fragile skin of Puck’s eyelid, then slipped out into the night.

I am a not a son, not a brother. I am a hunter. If I am not this, then what else is there?

-o-

Six hours later in Nebraska, Dean stood under a streetlight and read an address.

Fifteen hours later in Georgia, he pulled up a block away from that address and stared at the large dance club. Theresa hadn’t been shitting around, not that he’d doubted her. This place was hopping, a steady stream of men pouring in the door, glazed looks on their faces.

Moving among the crowd and drawing a clump of men behind them were the succubi, and even from a distance Dean felt a pang of animal lust as their lithe, scantily-clad bodies prowled through the sweat-sheen night. Below-ground would be the nest of eggs, slurping up the energy from above and man he really didn't want to go any further with that thought. And still the men poured in, stepping across the threshold to certain death, lured inside with a twirl of the hips.

Ten minutes later Dean crossed the same threshold with a thrice-blessed cross around his neck, two hunting knives, three Glocks, and a Desert Eagle strapped to his body. Oh yeah, that jacket had been one hell of a good buy.

The interior had a deep red glow that hurt the eyes and a jukebox cranked way up, no doubt designed to blind and deafen their prey. Dean stood still by the door until he got accustomed enough to see. Bodies gyrated on the dance floor in front of him, and more than a few were naked and writhing with something other than a mad love of T.A.T.U. Away to his left was a large bar set with a multitude of bottles both alcohol and non-described. The three women behind the bar gazed without pupils out at the crowd.

Hundreds of victims. Probably fifty succubi, maybe more for a crowd this size. Theresa hadn't been joking about that either, this was more than a two-handed deal.

There was a large archway on the far wall lit with candles. As much to escape the crappy pop music as anything else, Dean wound his way through the crowd, twisting to evade clutching hands. He could feel the currents of their power slip over his skin and slide away, finding no purchase. They'd notice him soon, a black hole in their midst that gave them nothing of himself.

A curtain of veils and beads hung in the arch, and he pushed through. Instantly the dance music dropped away to a distant thump, whether by sound proof walls or magic, replaced by a quieter jukebox melody that Dean barely recognized but felt like he should know.

Recollect me darling, raise me to your lips
Two undernourished ego, four rotating hips…

The red lights ended at the archway, too, replaced by flickering candles on the walls and hanging from the ceiling. There were beds and couches set into alcoves in the walls: in the dim light Dean could make out bodies moving there. The air swam with the pungent scents

of come and incense.

She's moving up slowly
Moving up slowly
Inertia creeps…

There were four tables set in the center of the room, two chairs on either side. One was occupied by an unconscious man who lay facedown, naked and limp. Dean moved to the table furthest from him, found a packet of discarded cigarettes and lit one. He rested elbows on the tabletop and let his gaze slide around the room slowly as the blue smoke rose and rose around him, writhing in the air like one of the bodies.

He'd have to kill them all. Humans and succubi. Whatever Theresa had planned, there was no way to simply walk in here and take out the demons. No, a fire would be necessary. Lock the doors, start the blaze, kill everyone.

I bounce off walls lose my footing and fall
It can be sweet though incomplete though
And the frames will freeze
See me on all four's
It's been a long time.

And himself, too, come to think of it, which he had been thinking about since Nebraska. Mentally, he'd measured the distance between a shack in Nevada and a demons' lair in Georgia, between despairing self-destruction and calculated martyrdom. He still wasn't sure if there was a difference.

The song ended. There was a stairway in the back of the room, leading down. Even a succubi nest would have gas pipes.

Then the candle beside him flickered and a different song came on and he *knew* the moment he heard the arrhythmic drums so unlike the previous song's sensuousness. He sat back as she passed, brushing lightly against his shoulder. He shivered.

Please allow me to introduce myself,
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I been around for a long long year,
Stole many a man's soul and faith.

"Hello, Dean," Mastema greeted quietly and sat down across from him.

Dean took one breath in and pushed it out.

She was as hard as he remembered… harder even, all lean muscle bound in a black trench coat, her hair pulled back tight. Her green eyes glinted bright even in the candlelight as she leaned forward, slid out her own cigarette, lit it, took a drag. The flickering illumination played on her face, made it young and ancient in shifting seconds.

Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzlin' you
Is the nature of my game

"What're you doing here?" Dean asked, just as quiet and controlled. The air in the room had shifted and he felt eyes on him. On them.

She cocked her head sideways. "Good question. But not the right one." Her thin lips pulled upward and as her skin moved he saw the scar that ran across the left cheek. Something had slashed, cut deep into the side of her face. She noted his look and raised one finger to touch the white line of flesh. "Nuckalavee."

Dean stared, lost for a moment in the memory of cold water and desperation. She'd paid in blood for that night, too, and it had been his brother that she saved. "Thank you."

Her smile twisted a bit. "For what? Killing them all? I do that on a fairly regular basis, sugar, and not for you." She had some Southern Belle accent going on, straight off a peach farm.

"So you're here for the massacre?" Dean asked, but knew better before it was even out of his mouth. He scoffed at his own words. "That'd be a hell of a coincidence, wouldn't it?"

"The second time, yes… I wasn't looking for you in New York. This time, no." She took another drag, tapped the ash loose. "You got faster, Dean… I only waited two days."

Keith Richards broke into a guitar solo. "What do you want from me?"

Her fingers stilled. "Now *that* is the six million dollar question. Any ideas?"

Around them, the curved, glorious bodies of succubi moved, gathering. Dean reached under his coat and Mastema flicked a hand. "They know me. They won't attack."

Dean stared. “If they know you, they know what you do. How can they afford not to?”

“Easily. Tell me, Dean, what is the first instinct of every living thing?”

“Survival,” he answered without pause, fingers curled around the Desert Eagle’s stock.

She nodded approvingly. “Exactly. They know me, what I can do.” Her eyes roamed around the room, completely unconcerned. “They might – *might* – defeat me with numbers, and yes I could die if it comes to that… but they know the first dozen or so are stone-cold goners. They won’t throw the first punch.” Her gaze came back to him. “Which gives us time to chat. So, Dean… what do I want from you?”

The bodies moved, pacing, shifting at the corner of his vision, but not moving closer. Dean took another deep breath. “Well, you are – or were, or are partly – a demon.”

A wide grin split her face. “Your immortal soul? Tasty thought. And I do know all your worst moments… I was present for a few of them, after all.”

There was always more with her, though. “You also have a grave in Arizona.”

That took the smile straight from her face and all the blood with it.

Just as every cop is a criminal
And all the sinners saints
As heads is tails just call me Lucifer
‘Cause I’m in need of some restraint

She cleared her throat. “Meaning?” and her low voice cut through the music.

Dean did not look away from her eyes. “That you might be more human than even you know. And if you are human, then speaking from experience, the night gets pretty fucking long and pretty fucking dark when you’re alone in it.”

A dip of her head conceded that possibility. “So by your own words, what I want from you and why I’m here depends entirely on what *exactly* I am.” The smile slid back in and she stubbed out the Marlboro, pulled another. “Sometimes I wonder, Dean. As many humans live in fear of me as demons. I’ve got deals with both sides,

and everyone hates me for it."

Dean swallowed. "What do you want to be?"

The cigarette's burn briefly lit her face in orange. "What do I *want* to be?" she repeated softly. Behind her, the false bodies of the succubi waited. She was so unlike them, ice to their fire, sharp edges to their curves. She leaned forward, her voice low and intense. "What I *want* is not and will never be on the table, Dean. Because I understand a few things about the world – case in point… I know beyond any shadow of doubt that forgiveness is the greatest gift that any creature can give or receive. I know that to punish others, however deserving, goes against that gift and renders it unto waste." She paused, her teeth gritted as if in pain. "I do not forgive – not one sinner nor demon. *Never*. I tempt, I hunt, and I destroy. Both sides… everyone. Everything. Not because I think I'm right, but because *I don't know how to do anything else* and I'm not sure that I *want* to."

-o-

Haven't you ever wanted a different life?

What different life? I'm not like you, Sammy. I'm not smart. This is all I've ever done, all I'm good at.

-o-

When he came back to himself, she sat ramrod straight, her shoulders squared. Perfectly mirroring him, down to the green eyes, and why hadn't he understood it before? The Rolling Stones trailed off into a silence disturbed only by muttered obscenities from their watchers.

"So what are you, Dean Winchester?" Mastema asked softly.

The next song came on and the opening drum hit went straight through him, down to the bone where it felt like a homecoming. Then came the strings, driving low then lifting higher, repeating.

Oh let the sun beat down upon my face, stars to fill my dreams.

And Mastema smiled, nothing like before. Bright, real laughter in her eyes, and damn she would be beautiful if she always smiled like that.

Dean laughed. She had selected the song before she even sat down. He loved her for that, if nothing else. "I'm undecided," he said, meeting her smile with his own. "Let's find out."

The first horn solo and they both came up, spinning to face away from each other. Dean heard steel ring clear of a sheath behind him. Instantly the beautiful faces around him twisted in rage, skin pulling back and teeth emerging as their demon forms burst free and then he had his Glocks out in each hand, firing. Two went down instantly, but a third came up on his left, talons out and shrieking. Dean ducked and spun to avoid her swipe, firing low into her body.

But not a word I heard could I relate, the story was quite clear.

The first instinct of every living thing is survival.

Dean rolled underneath one of the tables and came up on the other side, shooting a succubus in the face.

But it's not the only one. Survival and adrenaline will get you so far in a fight… beyond that, you need to have something else that'll see you through to the other side. Winning is not always the same thing as living.

The Glock in his right hand clicked: empty. He reloaded it one-handed while firing with the left.

Second horn solo. Strings, then the first bridge.

Two naked men staggered past him screaming in horror. Dean waited until they passed, then unloaded the rest of the left-hand clip into their lunging pursuer. Three more clips and the Desert Eagle. And the knife.

What are you, Dean Winchester? Hunter? It had worked the last four months. Puck had wormed his way in, found that little shred of determination. But no, not enough… not past that initial burst of adrenaline that had carried him here from Nevada.

His eyes found Mastema where she danced, her body moving with the kind of pitiless grace that could make Genghis Khan weep with joy. Two long, curved daggers in either hand and she leapt across a table, striking an opponent in the chest with both feet before spinning with arms outstretched to slash the throats of two others on either side. A walking symphony of destruction, elegant and terrible, leaving corpses in her wake. She was a hunter. But she was something ancient, beyond him. He was mortal, and if he wanted to live – *if* – he needed something more than the hunt.

More than a hunter.

All I see turns to brown, as the sun burns the ground.

A faint movement behind him and Dean spun, empty Glocks dropping to the floor and Desert Eagle lifting… to point directly at the wide eyes of a naked boy, about age fifteen. Dark hair and pale.

Something about the contrast flipped a switch in Dean's head and suddenly he thought of Merrill.

And my eyes fill with sand, as I scan this wasted land.

He thought of Merrill, who he'd loved, and Danielle and Devin and Bernie. Jason Darnell, who Mastema had loved. The mangled fishermen in New York, the girl in North Carolina with her bloody throat, Brian in Utah hanging from the ceiling fan, the homecoming king in Texas who'd been choked by a ghost, those twin girls in Michigan pulled under the water. All the dead bodies lost and gone.

And this one living boy, looking at him with a silent plea, who would join them soon.

Dean grabbed his arm without thinking, turned and fired the Desert Eagle wild. A surprisingly wise move: two succubi exploded in a mess of black blood. Which opened up a path to the door, and Dean shoved the boy along, shooting two others in the archway. Brought his death count up to twelve plus however many Mastema had taken out which left…

… about forty waiting for him outside.

Dean pulled up short, dragged the kid behind him. He went with a frightened whimper and cowered against the wall. They'd killed the music and in the absence he could still hear Zeppelin pounding from the back room. It echoed out onto the dance floor where eighty red eyes stared at him. And beyond them, the frightened stampede of victims struggling to break free of the spell cast by this place rushed for the door, cut to shreds by another two succubi standing guard.

"Ladies," Dean greeted, reloading the Desert Eagle. His hands shook.

Tryin' to find, tryin' to find where I've beeeeeeeeeen…

Underneath that falling wail, Mastema said low and intimate and laughing into his ear, "*Now* you want to live? *Now*?"

Dean slammed the clip into place, cocked it. "Hell yeah," he said, and

raised the gun.

The strings came crashing back, driving, inevitable. They came for him in a rush.

And then Mastema stepped past him without a glance or a word. Stepped in front of him with her daggers out. The first one reached her, cut down flat and on she went straight into their midst.

Dean reached back and grabbed the kid, hauled him upright. “Aw, what the hell,” he spat, and rushed forward into the fray, shooting left and right without aiming, not that he needed to. A teeming mass of limbs and talons met him, and he grunted as a hard swipe opened wounds on the side of his face. He shot in that direction and they fell away. Somewhere away to his right a tornado of blood and screaming marked Mastema’s continued warpath.

The green flicker of an exit sign shown distantly and Dean fired three more shots before the gun *click – click – click*ed.

Dean spun, flinging the kid in the direction of the door and taking out his knife in one motion. Half a dozen succubi closed in around him, forming an advancing semi-circle, crouching to attack.

Then there was a hand on his arm and an ammo clip materialized in front of his face. “You dropped this,” the kid gasped.

Dean laughed and threw the knife as the first demon lunged. Laughed and popped the clip in the gun, fired straight into a face just as its talons sank into his side. Laughed through the pain as he shot the other four down, then spun. The kid was at the door hitting a succubus with a chair. She snarled as the wood broke over her, raised her talons. Then Dean blew her head apart.

Dean caught the boy around the shoulders, pulled him up. “What’s your name?” he shouted over the cacophony of noise.

Huge eyes stared up into his. “M-Michael.”

“Michael.” Dean kissed his forehead, let him go. “Thanks, Mikey. You were worth saving. Now run for your life.”

Something slammed into his back and Dean hit the floor hard. His side and face screamed in agony, but he kicked out behind him and connected with something. The succubus fell back momentarily, but then pounced down and closed a hand around his throat. The world

dipped and then became a blur as it picked him up and threw him.

He landed hard against something, rolled, and dropped further with a grunt. Something rose up between him and the dance floor and Dean suddenly realized that he'd been thrown behind the bar. He'd also lost the gun. Rolling over, Dean sat up and put his back against the bar. They'd be after him soon and he didn't have anything left, not even his knife…

He looked up and saw row upon row of alcohol bottles.

He did, however, have a lighter.

The first one he hit in the face with a vodka bottle, lit her up and pushed her back among her fellows. Hurled ten other bottles in rapid succession until they were all on fire, staggering around in that helpful way that people on fire tended to do.

Mastema was still on her feet, though she'd lost one of her daggers and blood covered one whole side of her face. Dean vaulted over the bar, ran out and put his shoulder down into one poised to take a chunk out of Mastema's back. It bucked underneath him and he brought the broken whiskey bottle down, slashing at face and neck. It screamed high and guttural, but Dean was already up, spinning to find the next.

There wasn't one. The fire had spread fast, fed by alcohol and bodies, and an entire wall was alight. The remaining succubi, about a dozen altogether, had made a break for the exit. Beside him, Mastema raised a bloody face.

"Shall we run away now?"

Her face two inches from his, her green eyes glittering, Mastema replied, "Why yes, I think that would be an excellent idea."

They didn't run so much as stagger, leaning on each other. Dean scooped up the Desert Eagle as they passed.

Which was another excellent idea. The twelve remaining succubi hadn't fled so much as run outside into the middle of the street to battle the combined forces of Theresa, Caleb, Father Jim… and John Winchester.

Dean got outside the door just in time to see a succubi in mid-leap heading for his father's throat, and something snapped. Dean brought

the gun up and fired, struck her in the back mid-flight. Another two loomed near and the little snap fucking *broke*. He went walking forward, blind to everything else, blind to the raging fire behind him or the gaping hunters, feeling only his finger on the trigger again and again, his voice at a roar.

"*GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY FATHER YOU FUCKING BITCHES.*"

The two near John went down and Dean transferred his aim without breaking his stride, took down another behind Father Jim, another crouched beside a wounded Theresa. The last two took off running down the street.

Dean drew abreast of his father and paused. John stared at his son in absolute dead silence. Nobody moved.

"You okay?" Dean asked.

John blinked. "Yeah."

"Good," Dean replied, and took off at a dead run after the fleeing succubi.

Running feet echoed after him, but they had high laughter attached to them. His side was on fire and blood dripped into his eyes, but damn if he wasn't alive and laughing, too.

"It would seem," Mastema said a bit later as she slid onto the back of the motorcycle and wrapped her arms around him, "that we are both a bit more human than advertised."

-o-

The adrenaline high got them all the way to a hotel bathroom, until Dean groaned in pain as he stripped the shirt above his head.

"Be quiet."

"Dude, I have a two-inch gash in my side!"

"I know."

"Then why are you bitching at me for expressing my – ow!" Dean glared at Mastema as she frowned in concentration at his side. "You have a shitty bedside manner, you know that?"

She raised her eyes and cocked a brow. "Demon."

“That’s no excuse. Ow.”

“It’s not deep,” she announced, leaning back to pluck up a roll of gauze. The dressing she laid over him was quick and efficient, long practice of self-medication showing through. He watched her do it, suddenly wondering how many times she’d patched herself together… how many hundreds of years, how many millions of miles, how many shadows and ghosts.

She swiped at the blood in her eyes. “Hey, c’mon,” he murmured, pushing her hands away and reaching for her face. “Let’s see how much you whine when…”

He trailed off as he looked closer at the wound. A fine coat of blood covered the skin, but the cut had already closed up and looked more like a day-old scab.

She met his gaze coolly. “Demon.”

The cut on his own face had taken a couple of butterfly stitches. “Bitch.”

She smirked faintly. “Yeah, probably.”

He didn’t let go of her face. After a moment he traced a thumb over the scar on her left cheek. She shivered and stilled when he replaced thumb with lips. “Thank you,” he whispered against her skin.

“Wasn’t for you,” she reminded him, but her fingers slid up over his shoulder.

“Bullshit. You stepped in front of me back there.”

“What can I say? You remind me of myself.”

The words faded in the small bathroom, stark truth casting silence everywhere in its wake. Dean pressed his face against the side of hers, then turned and dipped his head.

Lips met in a mash of teeth, blood, and lingering adrenaline. She broke it after a moment, said something into his mouth that Dean didn’t even try to make out; he just grabbed ahold of her collar, forced her head sideways to slant his mouth across hers and felt more than a little smug when she staggered against him, all her grace suddenly gone.

When he finally drew back for oxygen, she said, “Smartass.”

“Yeah, probably,” Dean replied, and grinned.

Later, he stopped joking and she stopped laughing, though he still had his hands on her face and she still curved an arm over his back. And maybe she thought about a man in Arizona, but Dean didn’t particularly care as long as she kept her tongue moving over that hollow where his shoulder met his neck. And maybe he thought (very briefly) about everything and everyone buried and gone, but it seemed far away. *Not mine anymore, not mine, not me*, but still him, himself again. Dean Winchester.

A bit of neon-blue light from the window fell across her face and she looked up at him, pupils wide and unfocused. Open and unguarded, and he knew that he would not see this again, that this would not come again.

-o-

Morning shone on bruises and blood-stained clothes. Dean held up his previously-white shirt now streaked with succubus entrails. “That’s just nasty.”

“Why I wear black, sugar,” Mastema commented.

Dean balled up the shirt and tossed it, pulled his leather jacket over naked skin. Mastema cocked a head at his naked torso. “Going for the pimp look?”

Dean spread his arms to either side. “We aim to please.”

She gave a half-smile and turned away, sliding on black boots. Dean dropped his arms, bent his own attention to shoelaces. *It will not come again.*

Fully-dressed (or thereabouts) they stood in the parking lot and paused in the first rays of sunlight. Dean found himself looking at Mastema’s profile, at the severe lips and straight nose and the long brown hair tumbling free. He could see her shift, drawing a breath, pulling everything in tight and closing it up again. Knew that he was doing the same thing. They could both take themselves apart, lose everything but one piece, and still find a way to put themselves back together. Parts missing and holes in places that should be filled, but alive. Living bodies and Frankenstein souls.

Dean wondered (not for the first time) how many pieces of herself she'd mislaid along the way and knew that he would never know.

She looked at him sideways, all hard green eyes and the faintest echo of laughter. "Got a present for you, Dean."

He cocked an eyebrow. "My immortal soul?"

She chuckled faintly. "No. That's still yours so far." She jerked her chin towards his bike parked nearby. "I'll take that off your hands, though. Not very practical, you'd agree."

"It gets me through. That's your present? Leaving me stranded in Atlanta?"

She rolled her eyes and chucked something at him. He caught it on reflex alone and before he even looked, he *knew*. The feeling of the keys in his hand, and he looked across the parking lot like he hadn't last night.

It was there. The Impala, shining in the glory and beauty of a new day. *Baby, sweetheart, angel*.

Dean turned slowly around. She was already walking away towards the bike, but he said admiringly to her hair, "You fucking bitch."

Mastema laughed but did not turn back.

And that was the beginning of the 899th day.

Chapter 7: The 1032nd Day: Scars

The 1032nd Day: Scars

After running his fingers over metal, leather, and chrome like a relieved lover – *never again baby, never again* –Dean gunned the Impala northward, with the window rolled down and Metallica playing. The engine's growl passed through him and for the first time in longer than… well, a really fucking long time, Dean felt his heart and drummed his fingers to the beat.

It lasted until Lincoln. Then a vacant hotel room dropped his heart into his feet. Dean stood in the doorway and felt the room's emptiness, knew without looking that Puck's backpack and sweater were gone. He looked anyway, checking the bathroom and closets, forestalling the inevitable moment when he sat on the bed and let his useless hands dangle between his knees.

Except when he finally did sit down, he discovered that from that vantage point he could read the message scrawled in charcoal on the back of the door.

Call yor fuking father.

Dean didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so he did a bit of both. "Oh, Puck," he murmured softly, wiping his face. The adrenaline high of the last few days left him quite suddenly and in its absence he shook like an old man, hunched over like he might shake apart into tiny rattling pieces. But he wouldn't: the last few days, the last few months, years, had proven that to him. So he lay back on the cheap scratchy comforter and let it take him, alone in a hotel room where no one else would know. Grief, loss, anger, pain… they rolled up out of him, out of all the wounded places where they'd festered for so long. He let them come and he let them go, sliding up into empty air where he knew for once they would hurt no one.

Outside, car doors slammed and a child's high voice laughed, babbling with excitement. A truck went by somewhere, the machine in the hall rattled as someone got ice. Dean lay still with his eyes closed and fingers loose at his sides, just listening.

He woke up after twelve hours of blank, undisturbed oblivion, the kind of sleep he hadn't had in years. In the darkened room, his cell phone blinked with unanswered messages. Theresa left a three-

message-long profanity streak, Pastor Jim expressed concern for his well-being, and Caleb said in low, solemn tones like a prayer, "Goddamn, Dean. God-*damn*."

The last one was from his father. "Dean… you don't have to call. Just…" The silence raised hairs on Dean's neck and closed something tight in his chest. But somehow the tightness felt good, felt whole and clean. "Goddammit, Dean," John's message went on in a low, unsteady tone, "just lemme know you're okay. You don't have to call, you don't have to see me. But lemme know."

Dean deleted all messages and sat with his head bowed over the phone.

Frankenstein soul, full of holes, put back together from dust. But it's mine, it's me. And maybe some things wouldn't be fixed and some things *couldn't* be fixed. Scars grew over wounds, pulling the flesh together in a mess of thickened skin. A memory that left marks, maps to places he would not go again yet could never really leave behind.

But they did not bleed. Scars never bleed. So maybe some things could be fixed. Besides, he owed this to Puck.

Dean put the phone to his ear, strained to listen over the rush of his own heartbeat. It only rang once.

"Dean?"

"Hi, Dad."

-o-

They met in a diner outside St. Charles in that wide bend of the Mississippi that divides Illinois from Missouri. The place held a memory of pancakes and six-year-old Sam with syrup in his hair, still young enough to laugh about that kind of silliness. Dean smiled and knew John had chosen this place for that exact reason.

John, driving from Atlanta, hadn't gotten there yet. Dean leaned against the Impala, tilted his head back in the sun and fought the irrational panic building in his stomach. Crazy, he knew, to be more afraid of his father than a giant nest of succubi. Crazy, but he'd never been sane and the warm afternoon air felt vaguely Doomsday-ish, like a comet hurtling down towards the big red X on his forehead.

The comet arrived in a diesel truck's steady chug. Dean kept his eyes

closed, listened to the truck's engine pull cautiously near and swallowed. Distantly he heard the Grateful Dead *Shake it, shake it Sugaree, just don't tell her that you know me* before both the engine and the radio cut off. A door opened and slammed and when there was no more avoiding it Dean opened his eyes.

John circled from the other side around the back of the…

The truck.

Dean's mouth popped open of its own accord and a bark of laughter escaped him. Another and then he laughed hard, his shoulders shaking. John stopped short near the bumper.

"Holy *shit*," Dean gasped. "Where did you get that *beast*?" He unfolded his arms and stepped away from the Impala, briefly shocked out of his nervousness. The pickup drew him in like a big shiny black hole, all smooth surfaces and muscled tires. "How big are these?" he asked, bending to investigate the front tire. "4 feet?"

John Winchester's shape shifted uncertainly in the corner of Dean's eye. "Yeah," he answered gruffly after a moment. "Got it off a monster truck racer in Oakland. He made some, ah, modifications."

Dean looked up, a grin on his face that almost but didn't quite die. John was thinner, a beard on his face that hadn't been there before. "You're kidding me."

John pulled an irritable face. "I was in San Francisco, it was either this or buy a goddamned Jetta."

Another woop of laughter echoed from Dean's lungs, shook the air loose. The silence afterwards still ran long, but when John spoke his voice came easier. "You hungry?"

-o-

John watched him the whole way from the parking lot to their table, little glances from the side and a stare Dean felt between his shoulder blades. Looking at him in a way Dean associated with hospitals, when he or Sam would wake up after a nasty hit and greet their father's wide-eyed relief and reverence. It'd disappear quickly, carefully, but Dean had locked every single moment of those looks away in a place usually occupied by his mother's pictures and everything that was Sam.

Dean tried not to look but couldn't help seeing the mark on his father's right cheekbone, a thin straight line about two inches long. And when John glanced up at their waitress, another scar curved above his left eye. Dean hastily refocused on his menu but felt pretty sure John had caught him looking all the same.

"So where's your friend?" John asked and Dean had to think a moment. "The woman?"

Well Dad, she's actually a demon… not the bad kind, though! …actually, she is, but she's not all *bad. I think. And oh yeah, I fucked her, too*. "She's not exactly a friend," Dean said finally. "And she's not here right now."

He met his father's inquiring gaze and said nothing else. John read the silence and tilted his jaw back a bit. "Caleb said you had someone else with you, in Des Moines. Someone or something named Puck."

Dean couldn't stop the faint smile that came and didn't try. "Yeah. He's a friend. But he's not here right now either, unfortunately. He helped us before," he added, because they had to face it sometime, "in New York. He pretty much saved us all."

John opened his mouth and closed it. "Good friend."

"The best."

They stared at each other a few moments, then both went back to their menus.

It came along slowly like that. Dean said nothing about the men on Castro Street or that shack in Nevada where he'd tried and failed to give up his life. John's story began a good three months after Dean had left him in the hospital, conveniently skipping over rehabilitation and whatever else it had taken to get him back on his feet. "Started looking for you about two months ago." John wiped barbeque sauce from his mouth. "I even checked out Sam's place…"

Dean's fingers stuttered. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

"Jesus, no. Didn't even talk to him. Just tailed him until I figured out you weren't there. He's doing really well, has a new girl." John paused, looked out the window and his expression turned Dean's stomach with the weight of its sudden guilt and fear. "That was so close," his father whispered after a moment. "That was so fucking close."

The cheeseburger in Dean's mouth felt suddenly larger, but he swallowed anyway, forced it down with a gulp of Corona. After a moment John sighed, recollected himself and forced a smile. "You weren't that hard to find – subtlety has never been your strong point. That was one hell of a job you did on that gator down in Florida, by the way. What'd you use, a pipe bomb?"

Dean grinned back, thankful for the easier topic. "Grenade. It was awesome."

John chuckled, shook his head. "Anyway. Didn't take me long to find you. But I figured, you know…" He waved his fork and did not look at Dean. "I should probably let you come to me, all things considered.

All things considered. Possession, Nuckalavees, demons, attempted drowning, that bloody fight by the stream, Sam. "Yeah," Dean agreed quietly. John's eyes flicked at him and away, uncomfortable and uncertain. Dean looked out over the diner, found a familiar booth with his eyes. "Do you remember coming here before?" he asked. The *with Sam* was unnecessary.

John smiled, still with that edge of anxiety but genuine enough. "The pancakes. I remember."

Dean returned the smile and John's widened, became something real. The moment stretched out, buoyed by the memory of Sam's delighted shrieks and John half-yelling, half-laughing at his boys to stop squirting syrup at each other.

"You gonna eat your French fries?" Dean asked, unwilling to let it fade.

John wordlessly nudged the plate over to him.

-o-

They passed a long meal that way, drinking when the food ran out and silently fumbling their way through forgiveness. There were silences and pauses where before there had been words, a distance between that Dean had a feeling would never completely go away. But when John laughed about the alligator or leaned forward in excited interest as Dean described the salt-filled shotgun rounds and their effect on ghosts Dean thought that maybe, maybe they'd be okay. Not perfect and nothing like before, but okay.

Bellies filled and stories wound down. They shuffled out and stood

admiring the early evening, that 'magical hour' all the love stories talked about. Dean loved it for an entirely different reason: the last gasp of daylight before a hunt, when the air crackled with promise.

He felt his father's eyes on him. John smiled slow and knowing. "That was a hell of a thing down in Atlanta, Dean, whether you had help or not. You've gotten to be a damn good hunter."

Dean felt an absurd warmth that had nothing to do with the four beers he'd drunk. "Thanks." Then, because forgiveness wasn't quite enough, "I had a damn good teacher."

John nodded, shoved his hands into his jacket. "I did my best. Had to keep you boys safe somehow."

Evening slipped in along the streets, switching on lights in windows. Dean watched then moved away toward the cars. "C'mon, let's find a hotel." His father did not move with him. Dean looked back to find John standing still, an outline in the twilight.

"I did a hard thing to you, Dean," John said in a low voice full of gravel.

Dean swallowed hard. "It wasn't you, it was a Fury. You were possessed…"

"Not that… not that. Before, when you were young."

He didn't go on at first, staring out into the night. Dean waited, all the nervous panic coming back. But John needed to say it now and not in the light of day. Only now, when the night made them smudges, could the Winchesters see each other clearly.

"You both remind me of Mary," John said with a pained chuckle. "You and Sam. You've got her eyes, her colors… Sam's got her laugh. I could see her in both of you, right from the beginning and it – " he broke off briefly, "scared the hell out of me. Because it… the Thing got her, Dean. And you both were so little, and there was only me."

Night insects buzzed around them, waking up into a full symphony. John sighed like an old man, ragged. "At first I just wanted to protect you two. That was all… but the more I looked, the more I knew I had to find it. All those stories about family curses, ghosts passed from father to son… I knew I had to kill it before it came back. But… there was only me, Dean. I could barely take care of you two as it was, Mary had always been the one… but if I gave you boys up, wherever

you went, it might find you.

“You were already so scared for Sam, crawling into his crib all the time. And I thought, maybe… maybe I could make you strong. Make you tough, someone that could protect yourself, and your brother too. So I did. Everything I could, I did. Besides all the training, all the shit I’d learned… I taught that to you both. But you…” In the dark Dean heard him choke. “I did a hard thing to you, Dean, a billion hard things. You were the oldest.”

The faintest echoes of kids’ laughter sang in the air. A memory, just a memory.

It had never been about loving one of them more or one of them less, whatever the Fury had made his father's mouth say. But Sam had Mary's laugh... still had it, would always have it if Dean had anything to say on the subject.

While Dean... Dean had lines around his eyes and grease in his hair. Maybe an echo of his mother, but a faint one made fainter with night and blood and fear. And duty, the guardianship of Sam's laughter. *Had to keep you boys safe somehow, and you were the oldest.*

“Come on, Dad,” Dean said quietly. “Let’s find a hotel.”

John sniffed faintly and coughed. He fell into step beside Dean, a familiar thing.

As they neared the cars, John spoke again in a rough, congested tone. “Got some things for you, Dean. From your brother.” He must have sensed the sharp turn of Dean’s head, because he chuckled. “When I was looking for your sorry ass, I checked all the post offices. You remember that one in Lawrence?”

“No.” Dean wouldn’t go back there, even if he had known.

“I figured not. Maybe he thought you remembered it or maybe he was just being smart. But he sent you some stuff. It’s been sitting there awhile… thought you might want it.”

Dean’s palms suddenly felt a little clammy. He stood awkwardly beside the truck as his father crawled up into the bed and re-emerged with a plastic garbage bag. “Santa Claus,” John said with a sideways smile. At Dean’s confused look, he waved a hand. “You’ll see. There’s a hotel down the street. I’ve got a room already.” He passed Dean a key and the bag. “Seeya there.” Then he hopped straight into his huge

truck and roared away just like that.

Thirty seconds later, with the Impala's light providing illumination, Dean understood why.

Presents. The bag was full of presents. *To Dean, Happy Birthday. Love, Sam. To Dean, Merry Christmas. Love, Sam*. Six of them, marked one or the other. Three years of birthdays and Christmases. Dean opened them consecutively, using the postage marks as a guide.

July '02
The first held a Stanford sweater and a note: *Dad will probably punch you if you wear this… don't bleed on the sweater, it's cotton. I bought a new couch, why don't you come try it out this Christmas? Stay safe, love, Sam.*

Christmas '03
Then a portable CD player and a mix CD: *In case you want to join the 21st century anytime soon. CD's got all your favorites. How'd the thing in North Carolina go? Come visit sometime soon. Love, Sam.*

July '03
A Leatherman: *Hey, thought you might want one of these. Are you okay? Give me a call or something. Love, Sam*.

Christmas '04
A cell phone: *Okay, I know you're out there. I called Pastor Jim, he saw you two months ago. I got us a shared plan, call me, asshole. Seriously, come on, Dean. Sam.*

July '04
A strange pendant on a leather strap: *Picked this up in San Fran. Supposed to protect you. I turned 21 two months ago; always thought I'd spend it with you getting drunk. Jim hasn't heard from you in a while. I don't know where you are. I don't know how to find you anymore. Sam.*

Dean closed the Impala's door and the light went off. He sat in the thick darkness surrounded by wrapping paper, the presents assorted in a pile on his lap.

His heart felt like it was coming apart. "Aw, Sam," he whispered brokenly into the dark.

It took awhile to pull himself together and even then he wasn't sure where to go. If he'd been born a compass, he'd have been useless, as the world kept fucking spinning around on him. At last he started the

car up and drove to the hotel.

His father glanced at his face coming in the door, but said nothing. Continued to say nothing when Dean slipped the pendant around his neck, put the cell phone in his bag, wore the Stanford shirt to bed and fell asleep listening to AC/DC on the CD player.

Who knew “Back in Black” could be a lullaby?

-o-

They slipped back into things, Dean and his father. Not perfect, not the same as before, but okay. John moved a bit slower and Dean spoke a little less, memories cropping up at unfortunate moments but nothing they couldn’t glide over. A few things had even improved: when November 2nd rolled around, John stayed stone-cold sober and sane besides a few shadows in his eyes. In fact, he hadn’t touched a drop since Dean had been back. Dean knew better than to comment.

They went east, west, north and south. They went through North Carolina and John finally asked about the girl he’d killed and Dean finally told him most of it. John went out afterwards and Dean lay awake in bed all night, cold and terrified. But his father came back and the next morning they went hunting for poltergeists in Ohio.

When Christmas rolled around Dean spent four agonizing hours in a Barnes and Noble before finally emerging with *The 2,548 Best Things Anybody Ever Said*. He went through and earmarked all his favorites, including “Kinky sex involves the use of duck feathers. Perverted sex involves the whole duck.” Another two hours were devoted writing a letter, a note, a card, anything. He finally gave up and just sent the damn thing off wrapped in newspaper with *To: Sam Merry X-Mas From Dean* on scrawled on the top. Not the prettiest present ever and he felt small and pathetic and angry sliding it into the mailbox. He almost snatched it back at the last second.

He felt even smaller a week later when nothing had come back from Sam. John quietly found excuses to linger in the Lawrence area while Dean tried not to check the post office box every damn day. Christmas came and went and Dean couldn’t seem to get rid of the pit in his stomach.

Then, around New Year’s a letter came.

Dean,

You jackass. You asshole. You unbelievable jerk. I thought you were dead.

I've got a girlfriend, her name is Jess; I think I love her. Shut up. I think I'm going to graduate a semester early, too; the commencement will be in December of next year. I didn't get your present for a week because someone in the school's post office thought it was a bomb. Next time wrap it a little better, okay? Still, it's a good book, got some great quotes. Thanks, though I feel sorry for the poor duck.

I don't know what you're doing, if you're pissed with me and fucking with my head or something. Seriously, I thought you might be dead. I went to church and shit. I just… I really wish you'd decide what you want from me. If you still wanna be my brother, stop being an asswipe and FUCKING CALL ME.

"The highlight of my childhood was making my brother laugh so hard that food came out of his nose." – Garrison Keillor

It seemed appropriate.

Sam

Dean re-read it three times, smiled at the quote. He didn't call, though. *Where to begin and how?* He could start with the scar on his back where the demons in Arizona had sliced into his flesh, planned to use his skin as a belt. Or the scars on his father's face that Dean had put there to keep the man who'd given them both life from taking Sam's.

Scars didn't bleed, but they left maps to places that he'd been, places he never wanted Sam to see.

-o-

The succubi nest and Dean's account of six months on his own must have put John's wheels into motion, because after a couple dozen joint hunts, John spoke up one morning over eggs and toast. "You been to Montana lately?"

Dean glanced up. "Naw, why?"

The older man swiped at his mouth. "Couple of stories up there… sound like a werewolf. We need to hurry if we're gonna catch the full moon, though."

Dean frowned. “Okay, but what about those missing kids in Yellowstone Forest?”

“Well, I was thinking.” John leaned forward on his elbows. “You cleaned out the locker in Durango, picked yourself up some things… between the two of us, we’ve got enough equipment for both. Two cars, two hunters.”

“Two jobs.” Dean’s neck prickled. “You gonna be okay on your own?” John shot him a telling look. “Hey, you’re getting on in years, man. All I’m saying.”

His father scowled, swallowed his eggs. “Shut up, smartass. I can still whip your butt.” He sat back, put his napkin down on the table. “We’d still be close enough that if anything went wrong, we could call each other up.”

Dean nodded, warming to the idea. “Whoever finishes first can join the other.” He grinned. “So which one you want, teeth or trees?”

-o-

Two days later Dean slid the Impala onto the I-90 West, gunning it for the horizon. The truck stayed in the rearview mirror until the junction with I-25. Then John flashed the headlights once and dropped south. Dean watched him go even as he turned the Impala’s tires north. A surge of apprehension passed through him, but he quieted it sternly. John would be okay. Dean would be okay. They’d be okay.

Distracted with worry, he drove straight past the small figure on the side of the highway then slammed on his brakes so hard the car fishtailed slightly. Luckily there was no one behind him and Dean quickly threw the car into reverse.

The car door opened and closed. Dean put it in back in drive and pulled away. Reached into his pocket and drew out the Hershey’s bar he’d kept there, slid it across the seat. Thin fingers closed around it, brushing against his own and Dean had to fight not to grab at them.

“Thanks,” Puck said quietly.

They drove for in silence for a good five minutes as the world went spinning by. Puck’s hair had grown out a little, but he had obviously started washing it regularly. His clothes, though worn, were clean and neat and he hadn’t reverted back to a skeleton. On the whole, he looked about the same as the last time Dean had seen him. Asleep. In

the hotel room in Nebraska.

Finally Dean said, “I’m sorry.”

“S’okay,” Puck responded around a mouthful of chocolate. “I knew you were going.”

“And you didn’t kick my ass?”

Puck swallowed before answering. “I knew that you wanted to live, Dean. But you didn’t. There’s a big difference.”

Another few miles, then a thought occurred to Dean. “Do you not like my dad or something?”

“You needed time on your own with him, Dean. You still do. And I’m not going to be around much anymore.” At Dean’s sharp look, Puck amended quickly, “I’ll be around. But I think I’m going to be pretty busy from now on with – with her.”

Dean’s eyebrows went up. “Mastema?”

Puck nodded, his eyes round. “She’s hunting again now. Really hunting. Big things, old things. It’s been a long, long time and they’ve started creeping at the edges while she’s been gone with the man in Arizona. She always kept them in line, but since she went away…” he faltered suddenly and shot Dean a quick look before redirecting his attention out the window.

Dean’s mouth suddenly felt dry. “Exactly how long was she gone?”

Puck studied the horizon, licked his lips. “More than thirty years.”

“And the thing that killed my mother. Was it one of those big, old things?”

Puck hesitated then nodded.

Dean sat back in the seat. A wide variety of things suddenly came into focus. New York and the Nuckalavees and Mastema sending him to save his brother. Her stepping past him into the face of forty succubus demons, saving him from his own stupid death wish.

The hilltop graveyard in Arizona when she’d glared at him with eyes that had reduced other human beings to ash and snarled *If you were any other living creature, I would* end *you.*

He hadn't understood, hadn't caught the distinction that she'd always placed on him, even then. But he got it now. A debt, owed in blood.

Maybe he should feel rage, but he didn't. She'd bled to save his brother and had the scar as proof of a debt repaid. Dean looked at Puck. "And you're going with her?" That brought out a pang of something, felt like sadness.

"She needs me. She doesn't have a father or a brother, Dean."

Dean felt the pendant at his neck. "And I have both."

Puck returned his gaze steadily. "Only if you keep them."

That was to the point. Dean sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "And just where the hell do I begin? With Sam, I mean. You got any suggestions, 'cause dude, I – " he broke off, gestured emptily, looked away. Unwilling to admit to cowardice.

A creak in the seat and then Puck settled beside him, a warm head against his shoulder. "He's your brother and he loves you. You'll figure it out."

Dean stared out the windshield at the empty road stretching on into nowhere, where something vicious and dark and bloody waited for him. *Story of my life*. "I haven't got anything to give him," he whispered. "Nothing, no nice presents, no stories of happy sunshine and – and normal things. All I've got is this, hunting. And he left this, he doesn't want to hear about it."

"No, he doesn't," Puck murmured. He sounded sleepy and when Dean glanced his eyes were half-closed. Dean slid an arm around him, shifted until the small creature could use his shoulder as a pillow. "But he didn't leave you, Dean. He didn't leave you."

Dean opened his mouth to protest, but closed. Puck's eyes shut, a child in repose against Dean's side and Dean didn't have the heart to wake him.

-o-

The werewolf turned out to be a black dog. Dean dispatched it in three days and turned south where John was having an interesting time with a local cult. In the middle of the night, outside Bozeman, Dean pulled to the side of the road and opened his arms. Puck slid into them easily and buried his face in Dean's shoulder.

“You stay safe, now,” Dean gritted out.

Puck’s shoulders shook with his muffled laughter. “*You* stay safe.”

“Yeah.” Dean cleared his throat. “Don’t let her push you around, either. Mastema can be a nasty bitch.”

Puck laughed again, finally moved away to wipe at his eyes. “You should call Sam soon.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean it, Dean.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Puck frowned at him a moment longer, but then his eyes softened. He studied Dean’s face in the dashboard’s glow with the eyes of one who plans to be away for a long, long time. Then he turned to the passenger door, opened it and stepped out.

A sudden thought struck Dean. “Hey, wait!” He practically dove over the seat, shuffling around in the back before coming up with the CD player. Dean grinned crookedly as he thrust it into Puck’s hands. “All the classics. For your musical education.”

Puck’s eyes lit up and he smiled. “You’re determined to kill all my brain cells, aren’t you?”

“Only to replace them with something better,” Dean replied smartly, but curled his hands around Puck’s. “I’ll see you again, right?”

Puck eyed him slyly. “Call your brother. Then we’ll talk.” He stepped back into the night and shut the door, grinning.

Dean snorted. “Little shithead.” But the smile didn’t leave him as he pulled out. It stayed with him down the road.

It only wobbled once, in response to the roar of a passing motorcycle that went flying past him in the opposite direction. Too dark to see the rider, but Dean felt the prickle along his back and *knew*.

And that was the end of the 1032nd day.

Chapter 8: The 1313th Day: A Beginning at the End

The 1313th Day: A Beginning at the End

Dean slammed on the brakes and the Impala's front bumper kissed pavement. The headlight beams dipped crazily, swung back up to shine on the small figure standing two inches in front of the car. Dean's heart paused in its usual tread then gave a single hard stroke like a bomb going off in his chest.

Puck had blood coated on his front, on his neck, splattered across his face. His pupils, blown wide with terror, looked at Dean and looked past him up the narrow street to where Dean had just left Sam on his front porch, Sam who had come back and gone away again without ever actually returning to anything. Sam, alone, unguarded, without any weapons.

The blood on Puck's face shown bright red, recent. Later Dean remembers that he said "No" as if something had reached down into his lungs and ripped the word out. He imagines that he threw the car into reverse, tires squealing. He doesn't remember doing it.

He remembers the girl, pinned to the ceiling, the smell of her burning flesh. In the days afterward, when Sam jerked awake with animal noises of anguish and terror in his throat, Dean never asked why. The same image that transformed Sam's hands into claws in the sheets had etched itself onto the backs of Dean's eyelids.

They went to a college-town hotel that first night, after… well, *after*. A bit higher priced and nicer than what they were used to but Dean literally couldn't drive anymore. The walk from the car to the hotel room almost felt familiar, him walking beside his brother, exhaustion in both their steps. For a few seconds Dean's mind slipped and he lost track of where and when they were. All the fire and water and blood encompassed by four years was drowned out by two pairs of feet treading in time with each other. Dean unlocked their door, moved through the dark inside with the easy practice of a thousand similar rooms. Sam's feet moved a bit slower, shuffling forward. Springs creaked as he found one of the beds.

Then Dean switched on the light and four years leapt up to claim them. Sam sprawled across the foot of the bed, staring up at the

ceiling with a white, ravaged face. A smear of blood marked his forehead and Dean felt a spurt of panic, fearful that he'd missed something.

His fingers curled in the bag over his shoulder when he realized. *The girl's, the girl's*. He swallowed and looked away.

It took half an hour to line all the doors and window with salt. Dean laid charms on the door, drew the Anasazi signs Puck had taught him, though he doubted the protection of natural spirits could reach this deep into a city. A sawed-off filled with salt rounds went on his bedspread beside a silver-filled Colt, a squirt gun of holy water and his knife. Dean stood over his supply checking and re-checking the ammo.

The clock glowed 4:37 AM in pitiless, inarguable red. Dean blinked when he realized he'd been standing there for five minutes between their beds drifting. Sam hadn't moved, hadn't closed his eyes, barely seemed to be breathing. Dean's hands curled into fists again – *did I come too late did it do something to him* – and he said quietly, "Sam."

Only Sam's eyes moved, red-rimmed from the smoke and blank. They looked at Dean without an ounce of recognition or comprehension. Dean's stomach twisted and he felt himself start to shake. "Sam," he said, amazed by how calm he sounded. "Hey… c'mon, man, let's get you cleaned up."

Something flickered in Sam's eyes, more like confusion than anything else. His shoulder flinched from Dean's hand and Dean pulled away, the knot in his gut tightening. *What happened what'd it do to my brother…*

Then Sam blinked and came back to himself a bit, eyes sharpening. He sat up slowly. "I'm okay," he murmured in a low, cracked voice.

Dean stepped back; maybe if he breathed too hard his baby brother would blow apart into dust. "You uh… want first swing at the shower?" he asked lamely.

"Yeah," Sam answered to the floor. "Yeah." He didn't move, though, and Dean shifted this way and that rubbing small circles on his jeans. The room felt too small all of a sudden and Dean regretted coming here, *should have gotten out of town, should have kept moving…*

"You're bleeding," and Dean twitched in surprise. Sam's pale face looked up at him, eyes still dull but a little more human. He pointed at Dean's forearm, where a shallow gash had torn the skin open and

leaked red lines down towards his hand. His jeans were streaked where he'd rubbed them. Dean couldn't remember taking off his jacket.

"Shit… yeah." Dean struggled to bring his mind into focus, staring at his bleeding forearm like an entirely separate entity. "Musta happened going back down the stairs."

Something else flickered in Sam's eyes. "Did I do that?"

It hadn't occurred to him, but Sam had fought like Hell trying to get back into the room, back to *her*, back to the flames. Dean had fought harder and won. He shrugged carefully. "Dunno. Maybe… it's no big deal." He breathed deeply. "How 'bout you, you bleedin' anywhere?"

Sam shifted, evaluating and cataloging. "No," he said after a moment. "Don't think so."

Dean grunted and moved for the first aid kit. He'd grabbed it with a mind full of Sam, but now eased himself down beside the room's table. A long, empty silence stretched out, disturbed only by the small sounds of Dean's self-medication. He forced himself not to look at Sam, wincing as he applied disinfectant and cleaned the gash with a swab.

Bed springs creaked, feet shuffled on carpet and then Sam sat down across from him. Dean looked up but did not let his gaze linger. After a moment Sam reached out for the bandages, unwrapping a field dressing. Dean held perfectly still, eyes on his arm, as Sam guided the gauze around and around to press painfully but properly tight against the wound. "Thanks," he said when Sam finished.

Neither of them took showers that night. Dean fetched a wet towel from the bathroom, wiped down his arm, folded it over and handed it to Sam. He'd covered the cloth with his blood first so that when Sam put his face into the wet fabric he would not notice that he'd wiped Jessica's blood off his own forehead.

-o-

At about 9 am Sam finally gave up any pretense of sleep and took a shower. Dean, sleeping in fits and starts with one hand curled around his knife and his back to his headboard, woke to the sound of falling water. When it went on and on and on he got out of bed and stood outside the bathroom door, his heart in his mouth, straining to hear Sam's anguished breathing over the shower.

Eventually the water squeaked off. By the time Sam emerged wrapped in a towel Dean was back on his bed packing up supplies. He glanced up, then away. If he looked too hard, his brother might fade.

“I need some clothes,” Sam said.

Dean went out into the pallid morning and dug though the Impala, found an over-large T-shirt and a pair of sweats he was pretty sure belonged to his dad. Looking at them, Dean’s lungs seized up and he had to clutch the side of the car. *Dad where are you what’s happened I need you Sam needs you I don’t know what to do…*

The shirt sleeves fell a few inches short and didn’t quite cover Sam’s wrists. Dean tried on a lopsided smile. “Monkey Boy.” Once upon a time, he’d teased an adolescent Sam to the point of flailing rage about his over-long limbs.

Sam looked at him expressionlessly. Absolutely no hint of the boy he’d once been stared out from his flat empty eyes.

-o-

They drove back to the burned-out apartment. Dean didn’t want to, felt his palms sweat like mad as they got closer *get away keep moving outside as fast as you can don’t look back go Dean go*. But Sam (or the automaton that looked like Sam) wanted to go back, so they did.

They pulled up on the street about midday, in the exact spot Dean had left Sam the night before. As before, Sam got out of the car and trudged up the walk. Dean, the whole organ of his skin crawling, slid the silver-filled Colt under his jacket and got out to follow.

A good half of the building was gone, the edges blackened and smoking. A few people moved among the rubble, firefighters and cops. Police tape stretched across the yard and hands came up as Sam ducked under without hesitating. Dean ran to intercept just as a wary looking man in a suit pushed against Sam’s chest. “Sam,” he said, reaching out to grab his arm, and the man’s face changed.

“Sam Winchester?” he asked, looking hard up at Sam’s face. He had gray around his temples and wore his suit like it rose out of the ground one day to claim him and he’d resigned himself to it.

Sam blinked down at him. “Yes,” he responded after a moment. Well, at least he was capable of communication. Dean stood at his elbow, suddenly feeling awkward and out of place, an imposter. He let go of

Sam and shifted backward.

“Daniel Connors, Paolo Alto Fire Investigative Unit.” The guy flashed his badge and Dean had to suppress a flinch. Normally the action had him either lying or running for the hills. He held his tongue and legs still. “I need to ask you about what happened last night.”

Dean’s stomach dropped. *Shit.* They hadn’t talked about it or gotten a story together that didn’t involve girls on the ceiling. Connors turned in his direction and Dean slid a poker face on. “And you are?”

Dean glanced sideways at Sam, but he stayed fixed on the building. “Dean Winchester, brother,” he answered shortly, his version of a professional statement. Didn’t have a badge, though. He glanced sideways one more time then plowed ahead. “He ah… he was wondering if there were any clothes, anything that… survived. My stuff doesn’t really fit him.” He gestured lamely to Sam’s exposed wrists.

Connors nodded. “We’re still processing the building, but we’ll pull out everything we can. In the meantime, I need you both to come down to the police station with me.”

Sam’s eyes came around quick. “I want to go inside,” he said sharply.

Connors met his gaze with a poker face of his own. “The building hasn’t been declared safe yet,” he said evenly. “And we’re still processing the fire.” *You’re still a suspect.*

Sam must have heard the undercurrent of his tone, too, because he tensed. Dean reached back out and clamped on his arm. “C’mon, Sam,” he started, but his brother shook him off.

“I need to go inside,” Sam said, louder, and Connors’ eyebrows went up. The detective was a good six inches shorter than Sam but had a posse at his back. Dean cursed mentally and slid between them, putting himself between Sam and the building.

“Sam,” he said just as loudly. “C’mon, man, you heard him, it’s not safe.”

Sam glared down at him, furious. Dean thought distantly that he must have grown a bit more in the last three years. “I. Don’t. Care,” Sam gritted out, his teeth clenched. “I need to – ”

Then his gaze slid past Dean and the sentence died like something had

wrenched it away. His eyes went wide and everything in him just *split open* right there in the yard.

Dean turned. A pair of firefighters came down from the porch, each bearing one end of a stretcher, upon which a black body bag rested.

Oh, shit.

Dean had enough time to realize that the bag hung half-empty, that the firefighters carried it far too easily, before Sam made a noise like dying and pushed past him. “Sam,” Dean gasped, staggering, trying to find his balance. Then, “Sam!”

He dove after his brother, closing fists in Sam’s (Dad’s) shirt, on his arms, around his waist, anything to slow him down. “Sam,” he shouted, grabbing his brother’s jaw and wrenching it around. “Sam, don’t! Goddammit, stop, she’s not there, it’s just bones!”

Sam made another noise and swung clumsily. Dean ducked and came up, catching the arm and twisting, using the momentum of Sam’s body to pin him down on the wet grass. With his knee in his brother’s back and a hand holding his arm locked between shoulder blades, Dean said straight into Sam’s ear, “She’s gone, Sam. It’s just bones. She’s gone.”

The fight went out of Sam just as quick as it had come. He lay facedown and limp, not speaking or moving. After a moment Dean eased back and looked up. Connors stood over them, wiping at a bloody lip and eyeing Sam. Dean swallowed: that wasn’t going to help. “Sorry. He… wanted to come back. I didn’t know why, he didn’t say.”

Suddenly he felt small and foolish, half-sitting on his brother’s back in the grass and giving excuses like a child. The house loomed over them and Dean looked down at his little brother, his baby brother, Sam, Sammy, who lay on the ground like a dead thing.

After a moment Connors asked quietly, “Do you think you can get him to come downtown?”

Dean swallowed, not daring to look up, and rubbed a hand across his face. “Yessir.”

Sam came without resistance when Dean lifted him. His face had gone blank again, completely removed from everything happening around him. He followed Dean’s guidance to the squad car, got inside without

protest. Dean took his hands away as soon as they were inside. If he touched his brother too hard he might dissolve.

-o-

Dean had taken most of their arsenal out of the Impala's trunk the night before, made sure the trick latch was secure. Now, sitting in a police station with every inch of his skin itching and every hair on end, he blessed his forethought. They'd look through it, puzzle at the books and newspaper clippings about women in white. John had always brushed past raised eyebrows with a cockeyed alibi of research for a book.

Dean could only hope that Sam would remember that right about now. They'd taken Sam first, no doubt wanting to question them individually and compare stories. Seated in the waiting room, Dean jiggled his right knee and tried not to lose his mind. Entirely separate from his anxiety about Johnny Law hovered some deep-rooted wandering panic *where's my brother where's my brother* like if Sam walked around the corner he'd evaporate.

"Dean Winchester?" A junior detective politely waved him forward.

The interrogation room looked completely unlike and exactly similar to the one in Jericho. Metal and glass instead of wood and concrete, but the same enclosed lines. Dean felt his thoughts pull in close around him as Connors stood up from the table and waved a hand at the chair on the other side. "Please sit down."

Dean sat. No way to talk to Sam, find out what he'd said, make it match. *Sam*, he thought desperately, *please still think the same way you always did, 'cause otherwise we're fucked.*

Connors flicked on the tape recorder, gave the date and time. "So," he said, sitting back. "Please start at the beginning. What happened last night?"

"I visited my brother, Sam. Sam Winchester. This was… kinda the first time in a long while. We lost touch when Sam went away to college.""

"Why was that?"

The trick about getting through interrogations (real ones, not the ham-fisted Jericho variety) was to tell the truth as much as possible. "We're different people. Just got… different lives. I'm a writer, move around a lot. I pretty much live out of my car and Sam… he wanted

something more permanent, I guess." *Something better*.

Connors made some notes. "So you visited your brother for the first time in a while. What'd you two do?"

"Talked. Tried to, you know, hash some things out." Dean's fingers twitched and he surprised himself by adding, "I'd missed him a lot."

Connors read the simple honesty of that comment and nodded. "And afterwards?"

"I brought him home. Dropped him off outside, drove away."

"The hashing out didn't go well?"

Dean raised his empty palms. "Like I said, we're different people. He had an interview Monday morning. Some law school thing." Dirt and calluses covered his hands and Dean put them away slowly.

"Did you notice anything unusual about the house, the neighborhood? Any cars, people hanging around?"

Dean remembered wide terror-filled eyes in his headlights. His nails drove into his palms. *No. No.* "No," he said aloud. He could already feel the fractures straining; if he thought about Puck, little Puck, covered in blood that wasn't his brother's, then he'd break. "I turned around. Don't know why… I guess just to look back at Sam. I turned around and saw the fire start upstairs."

"Was your brother inside the house at that point?"

Dean's nails went deeper. "Yeah. Yeah, he was."

"What'd you do?"

"Kicked down the front door, ran in after him."

"That was pretty brave."

Dean swallowed. Even if Sam hadn't brought it up, they'd see it in their reports. "I've had practice. My mom died in a fire when I was four."

Connors eyebrows reached for his hairline and he leaned forward. "Really. Your brother didn't mention that."

Dean shrugged carefully. "He probably doesn't even remember it. He

was six months old. My dad… he tried to save her, barely made it out himself. He gave Sam to me, told me to run outside with him."

Pen scratched over paper and Dean wondered what they'd make of it. "Any word on what caused that fire?"

"Fire department in Lawrence said it was the stove."

The old detective gave him a penetrating look. "If you don't mind me saying, that's some pretty bad luck you boys have."

"Yeah. It is."

-o-

Their stories must have matched more than not, because Connors let them go that afternoon. "We might need to ask you some more questions." He handed a card to Dean. "Please stay in town until the end of week." He didn't say that to Sam and suddenly Dean wondered what his brother intended to do. There had been that moment outside the Impala's trunk, when he'd said "We've got work to do." But nothing in the one-word answers afterwards had followed up on that sentiment.

The trash on the Impala's floor had shifted; that was the only sign that they'd searched the car. Dean poked a smashed Twinkie with his foot and suddenly remembered that neither of them had eaten in the last 24 hours. "Hey, you know any good place to eat around here? Something other than vegetarian organic sushi, I mean."

Sam eased into the passenger seat, pulled the door shut behind him. His knees bumped against the dashboard and Dean blinked, moved the front seat back a bit. He settled on the notch between what would stretch the pedals beyond his reach and another that would have Sam's knees in his jaw.

"There's a shopping center just north of campus," Sam reported tonelessly. "They've got a lot of different food if you're hungry."

Dean glanced over, but Sam stared out the window. Not avoiding, just looking, no expression.

The blankness broke a little when Dean thumped him on the shoulder and dropped a takeout bag in his lap. "What's this?" he asked, picking up the bag and staring at it like it'd come from an alien spaceship.

“Philly cheese steak sandwich with double cheese, no onions. Weirdo.” Dean unfolded his own meal unsteadily, trying to watch the road, mind the upholstery, and keep an eye on Sam all at once. “Still don’t know what you’ve got against onions.”

After a second Sam said quietly, “Thanks.” The paper crinkled as he unwrapped the enormous sandwich and dug in. It must have woken up his stomach because he ate fast, along with his potato wedges and half of Dean’s as well.

Mid-swallow, Sam suddenly lurched and made a small noise like a burp. Then another, and another, getting progressively louder. Dean bit the inside of his lip to keep from laughing. “Dude, hold this over your mouth.” He dumped spare ketchup packets from the takeout bag and handed it over. Sam, jumping with hiccups, breathed into it. But after five minutes of the bag inflating and deflating, they hadn’t gone away. Dean leaned over and poked him gently. “You want to try Dad’s cure?”

Sam’s eyes widened. He’d always hated holding his breath, ever since he was eight and some kind of freaky Japanese demon that looked like a flying cloth had wrapped itself around his mouth and nose, holding on while Sam thrashed and kicked desperately. He’d been blue by the time Dean got free of his own evil handkerchief. Ever since he’d had a phobia of suffocation, strangulation, drowning… anything where he couldn’t breathe right.

They pulled into the hotel’s lot and Dean put the car in park, switched the engine off. He turned to face Sam, who had lowered the bag and now had a close-to-irritated look on his face. Not great but better than the blankness.

“Hold still and close your eyes,” Dean instructed. Sam glanced over at him and frowned, still resistant. Then a particularly bad hiccup twitched his ribcage and he thumped a fist against his thigh, frustrated. Giving up, he sat back against the seat and shut his eyes.

“Put your hand on your stomach,” Dean went on, keeping his voice steady and mellow. “Breathe in two three four five aaaand hold it. Push your hand out as far as it’ll go.” Dean watched Sam’s stomach inflate, stretching his diaphragm, and thought of a hundred times like this. Sam had never learned the fine art of pacing his food consumption and sometimes hiccupped to the point of frustrated tears, which of course only made it worse. In the beginning it had been Dad who talked him through this old wives’ cure. Sam could never keep

track of the count in his head, too distracted by the stillness of his own lungs. So their father had done it for him, low voice rumbling and gentle like it rarely got. "…seven eight nine ten, exhale two three four five pull your hand in." And of course Dean had done it too, more and more until their father's voice faded and his was the only one left. "Deep breath in two three four five out two three four five."

Sam's eyes opened, looking straight ahead but then curving around to find Dean. He swallowed, shifted, and nodded. For the first time since… well *since*, his eyes looked present, aware, seeing his brother beside him.

Dean tried out a gentle smirk. "All right there, princess?"

Sam scoffed faintly. "Shut up."

-o-

The food came back up later, heaved into the toilet. Dean stood outside the bathroom, the adrenaline that had surged at Sam's first awakening scream fading from his veins. On the other side of the door, Sam puked and sobbed until Dean thought he must be turning inside out.

"Jess," he moaned in between bouts. "Jess."

Dean went back and lay on his bed, staring up through the darkness at the ceiling.

-o-

They went to Goodwill the next morning, when the circles around Sam's eyes might as well have been drawn on with fists. He looked at the racks of second-hand clothes and said quietly, "I need a black suit."

Dean put his head down and went to work, shuffling through the clothes. He felt pathetically grateful for a task, anything to keep his hands busy and stave off that empty sensation of uselessness. Sam joined in the search as well, but in a listless, abstract way. Dean pulled out a pair of black pants, a bit worn at the edges but decent. "Hey, Sam, think these'll fit you?"

Sam, fingering the collar of a suit jacket, frowned at the pants. "Yeah, sure," he murmured, and put the jacket back.

Dean bit his lip to keep from shouting, racing over there and shaking the shoulders of this dead-eyed stranger. Screaming *wake up give me back my brother*. He flung the pants over one arm, scooted away along the rack. He could remember a time, somewhere in Utah, when it had been so easy, when clothes crappier than these had elicited a wide grin of delight…

His steps stuttered and Dean closed his eyes. *No*. If he thought of Puck, he'd break in two, and experience told him the Winchester family had to take turns at that sort of thing.

"Dean?"

He turned, startled, to find Sam at his elbow with a pair of slacks. "These might work."

Dean held them up and frowned. "You gonna wear shorts to a funeral? 'Cause these are about three inches short on the legs, dude."

Sam huffed a little laugh and Dean's surprise deepened. "They're for you, idiot. Unless you've gone soft and actually bought something other than jeans for once."

He took his own pair from Dean's arm and shuffled away. Dean checked the label; his size.

Eventually they emerged with a full suit and tie ensemble for Sam and the pair of black slacks for Dean. He drew the line at ties. They drove a few times around campus, Dean pretending to get lost and Sam waking up enough to point out the right way.

"Take a left up here." Sam pointed and Dean blinked. It wasn't the way home, but he flicked on the blinker anyways. The left curve lead them up a hill lined by fir trees on the right side and an open meadow on the left. Bright grass curved away down a hill overlooking the red tile rooftops of campus. Dean pulled into an open parking spot without being asked and switched the car off. He didn't look at Sam. Looked out the window instead, stared at the rolling green hill. A faint breeze made the trees beside them creak. College students passed them on the sidewalk, attached to cell phones or iPods.

"I came here my first night," Sam said low in his throat. "Didn't have a place to stay yet… I slept on the grass out there." He swallowed audibly. "I wasn't the only one, there were a lot of kids… Most had homes and just wanted to sleep out under the stars, hang with their friends, whatever. Somebody gave me a blanket; it was June, though,

so I didn't really need it. I just lay out there and thought, This could be it. This could be the rest of my life."

Something turned in Dean's stomach and he couldn't help but look. Shadows hung heavy around Sam's eyes, but they had life in them. He smiled crookedly. "Guess not."

Dean forced himself to speak. "You could stay here. No, listen, you could. I'd find it on my own, I'd find whatever did this. You don't have to…" *come with me*. He couldn't quite say it and cursed his own weakness.

Sam was already shaking his head. "No, I couldn't."

Dean stared at him, studied the lines of his brother's face then looked back out over the hillside. "You want to get some lunch?" he asked eventually.

"Sure."

-o-

Dean stared at the concoction Sam set down in front of him. "You've *got* to be kidding me. I get you a perfectly good sandwich and this is how you repay me?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "It's Kung Pao Spaghetti, Dean, you love Chinese food. Besides, you can't come to California without eating at CPK. It's like, a universal rule."

"Sam, look at it. It's *tastefully arranged*. Probably low fat, too." Sam dug into his own meal and avoided Dean's eyes. "It *is* low fat, isn't it? You bastard. You sneaky underhanded little bastard."

The ghost of a smirk danced across Sam's lips. "'Little'? What's this 'little'? I seem to recall a major difference in pant sizes this morning."

Dean pointed a warning fork at him. "Only 'cause you got chicken legs, bro. I'll always be bigger where it counts."

"Aw, man, don't say things like that to me when I'm eating. In fact, don't say things like that at all in my presence."

"The truth hurts, Sammy."

"It's Sam."

“Sam?”

They both looked up at the voice. They’d settled on a bench outside the shopping center to enjoy their takeout. Six feet away and walking closer was a young black man, well dressed. Could have been a stockbroker, probably aspired to be. Sam’s face changed when he saw him, opened up a little, and he set aside his chicken fettuccini. “Hey, Tucker,” he greeted quietly as he stood.

Tucker didn’t hesitate. He stepped right up and put his arms around Sam tight.

Dean was slow to get up, just as Sam was slow to let go.

“Dude,” Tucker said in a thick voice when he and Sam finally parted. “Where the hell you been? I called your cell a dozen times, Carrie too.”

A petite girl with coffee-colored skin stood behind Tucker, tears in her eyes and fingers over her mouth. “Hey, Carrie,” Sam greeted hoarsely. “I’m sorry, my phone didn’t make it.”

Carrie shook her head, her face crumpling up. “It’s okay, it’s okay…” She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Sam’s waist. “I’m so sorry, Sam,” her muffled voice murmured into his shoulder.

This hug lasted longer than the first. Tucker glanced in Dean’s direction curiously but Dean did not speak. The California sun suddenly seemed too bright. When Carrie let him go there were tears on Sam’s face and he shook badly. “I’m sorry,” he whispered brokenly, wiping at his eyes.

“It’s okay,” Carrie repeated, reaching up to touch his cheek. “We loved her, too.”

Sam made a shattered noise and ducked his head down. His shoulder hunched like he was caving in on himself. Dean started forward automatically, hand half lifting. Then Carrie looked up at the sudden movement and he rocked back again quickly. “Who’s this?” she asked.

Sam drew in an uneven breath, clearly struggling to pull himself together. “Dean,” Dean said to buy him the time. “I’m Sam’s older brother.”

Carrie’s eyes bounced from him to Sam and back even as she shook Dean’s offered hand. “Carrie. This is my boyfriend Tucker.” Tucker, on

the other side of Sam, flicked his fingers in greeting. Dean jerked his chin back, feeling Carrie's eyes on him. He smiled blandly to her.

"Sam," Carrie said, surprise etched in her face, "I thought you said you were an only child."

Dean turned to the bench, bent down to scoop up his takeout and Sam's. "'Scuse me," he announced to the group at large, bringing all their eyes around onto him. The imposter. "I'm just gonna go put these someplace cool so they don't spoil."

He walked away before anyone could reply, a doggie bag in either hand. When he reached the car it took all of his self-control and love of his baby's upholstery not to throw them into the back.

There was a newsstand nearby and he walked over, bought a paper and leaned against the Impala to read. The fire had made the first page and he examined the story through a couple of times then began flipping through the rest of it, looking with a trained eye for anything out of the ordinary. He didn't find much: there were the typical reports of gang shootings, a meth lab that had been broken up, and some frat brother had fallen off a roof trying to drop jack-o-lanterns on his friend's car.

Steady footsteps came across the pavement toward him. "What the fuck." Sam's voice was low and completely level, the way it got when he was really, genuinely pissed off.

Dean lowered the newspaper and met his brother's furious eyes. "What?" he inquired and wondered exactly how far he could push this. Sam looked close to taking a swing at him.

"What, you wandered off to do a crossword?" Sam snarled.

"Naw, crosswords were never my thing. Too many big words."

Sam took a step forward and Dean remembered the extra couple of inches he'd recently acquired. "What the *fuck* is your problem?"

Dean met his eyes coolly. "No problem, Sam, no problem at all." He folded the newspaper over, showed him the front page. "Just thought we should get a start on the whole looking-for-your-girlfriend's-killer thing."

Sam's rage wavered and crumbled completely. He reached out and took the paper, hands unsteady again. Dean hated himself just a little,

but it was a familiar thing. He ducked his head and turned away, opened up the car door.

-o-

They spent the rest of the afternoon in a computer lab, tucked away in a back corner where Sam could avoid any further mourners. He didn't speak to Dean except when absolutely necessary and stared pointedly at his computer screen. Avoiding, now.

Great. Dean sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd always prided himself on level-headedness: even when he was doing something crazy or stupid, at least he *knew* that it was crazy or stupid. But with Sam, all that seemed to go out the window. He'd forgotten how fast they could push each other's buttons, one part of having his little brother around that he hadn't missed.

They walked out with a few printouts but nothing hopeful, which only contributed to the strained silence between them. Sam had a narrowed look in his eyes that wasn't all about Dean anymore and when they got back to the hotel room he sat down at the table with the newspaper spread out in front of him.

"C'mon, dude," Dean groaned, rolling over to flip back the covers. "I read that already, there's nothing there."

"I'm just rechecking it," Sam answered shortly. "You might have missed something."

Dean shut his mouth tight and rolled back over, pulling the comforters over his head to shut out the light.

When he got up the next morning, Sam was still at the table. Newspaper ink stained his fingertips, the hollow look had come back and none of the pages in front of him had been earmarked.

-o-

As much for Sam's sanity as his own increasing desperation to do something – *anything* – Dean took a risk and called up the property managers of Sam's apartment. No doubt thinking of lawsuits, they were all too eager to provide information to an assistant of Fire Investigator Daniel Connors. When he hung up, he had a list of every maintenance and management personnel in Sam's building.

Sam, when he ducked back into the room, had fallen asleep at the

table, a cup of coffee forgotten at his elbow. Dean slid past him as quietly as possible into the bathroom. No point in waking him up: he needed the sleep and Dean needed the clarity that Sam's presence always removed.

In the bathroom Dean opened up his phone again and made the call that he hadn't for two days. "Dad, it's Dean." He paused and tried to get himself together. "I'm – I'm at Stanford. With Sam. We're okay, both of us, but…" Something cracked; he could feel it go and he rushed on with the message before it crumbled out from beneath him entirely. "It came here, Dad. The thing that killed Mom. It killed Sam's girlfriend Jess. Jess Moore. It pinned her to the c-ceiling. I saw her, we both did. I barely got Sam out in time." He sucked in a breath through his teeth. "So, um… if you can, please call me back. I got your coordinates to Blackwater Ridge, we'll be there as soon… as soon as we're done here. Please just – wait there for us, okay? Just wait. We'll be there soon, I promise. Okay… bye."

He hung up and leaned over the sink, hands tight on the porcelain.

A crash and strangled cry from outside brought him through the door fast as he'd ever moved. Sam lay on the floor beside an overturned chair and his shattered coffee cup. Dean practically dove for him, ignoring the scalding liquid that his knees encountered. "Sam, Sammy, are you…"

Sam flailed a punch. A weak one, considering his position, but it still snapped Dean's unprepared head back. Sam scrambled away, his feet sliding on the carpet, his eyes wild and breath ragged in his throat.

Dean knew better than to follow. All those nights when he'd shaken his father's shoulder, begging *Dad Dad wake up* in a child's high voice.

He'd taken his fair share of hits back then, too, hard ones that had whipped his head around and left him lying on the floor like a ragdoll as his father choked above him with dawning horror and self-loathing.

Dean swallowed and said calmly, "Sam. It's okay. You're awake, it was just a dream."

-o-

They spent most of the day in silence. Sam seemed to be sliding back down into that emptiness and Dean watched, fingers clenched at his sides, helpless. He thought of Tucker and Carrie, who'd offered comfort so easily, of how Sam had taken that comfort just as easily,

and he wondered when exactly he'd failed his brother this time.

He bore it for as long as possible, offering food and mindless conversation to the blank shell of Sam's grief. In late afternoon, though, he slipped out as Sam's eyelids dropped again. If he stayed any longer he might actually start climbing the walls.

The property management's office had tasteful plants and a plump secretary who blinked at Dean's wide smile and didn't even ask for a badge. "Here you are," she squeaked, stealing glances at him with bright blue eyes. She had the soft face of someone who had probably never seen the spotlight and he gentled his usual advances, knowing that a little attention would suffice for someone that had never had any. She handed over the employee files and surveillance tape readily.

"Thanks, Candice, for taking your time to do all this," Dean murmured, and she blushed, ducked her head. "Just one more question, were there any personnel in the building that night?"

She bobbed her head immediately. "Doug Whislop, the plumber. There was a sink overflowing on the second floor and he was on call that night."

Dean grinned wide and could almost see her heart stop. "You're a doll."

Doug Whislop was not going to be charmed in the same manner. He squinted at Dean out of a grizzled, scarred face and grunted. "Didn't see much of anything. Just the usual crowd, college parties. Halloween weekend, ya know." He shrugged loosely as if that explained everything.

"So there were a lot of people in and out of the building that night?" Dean asked wearily.

"A fair number, yeah. Most of them going to the second floor… some big party there, I guess. Somebody puked in a sink, plugged it up." He snorted in disgust, shook his head. "Damn kids. They had me in here Friday night, too. Some drunk idiot picked a fight and got put through a door."

Dean blinked. "Jesus. Through a door?"

"Yeah." Whislop perked up, chuckled at the thought. "Didn't hurt him much, I guess, but took the door off the hinges. 'Parently he grabbed somebody walking by in the hallway. Musta been some kinda karate

expert, ‘cause he got thrown back into the doorway.”

“Did you see the guy who did it?”

The plumber shrugged. “Naw, I got there long after. Nobody called the cops or nothin’… they were all too drunk. I didn’t neither. Kid was smashed, brought it on himself.”

“Right. You remember around what time this was?”

“Musta been around three in the mornin’, Friday night.”

“Right. Okay. Thanks.”

-o-

Sam was wide awake and pissed when Dean got back. “Dude, where the hell have you been?”

Dean shucked his jacket into a chair. He held up the personnel files. “Following up on leads. Wasn’t that what you were so keen on doing?”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “You want to tell me why you didn’t bother to wake me up? I mean, gee, Dean, do you think that maybe *I* might have an interest in this too and want to be *included*?”

The chuckle slid out before he could stop it. “Well that’s seven different flavors of ironic.”

“What?”

“Nothing, Sam,” Dean snapped, feeling his patience stretch to the breaking point. He tossed the files onto Sam’s bed. “I just figured that since you actually *lived* in that apartment, someone might recognize you and you’d have a hard time buying that you’re suddenly a cop conducting an official investigation. But you know, maybe I’m wrong.” He lifted his palms to the ceiling. “*I’m* obviously not the smart one. So why don’t you take a read through those and let me know what you find, alright college boy? God knows I might *miss something*.”

Sam’s eyes were narrowed practically to slits. “You. Are. An. Asshole.”

Dean laughed a little wildly. “Me? I’m the asshole? I’m not the one that pretended I didn’t have a brother, Sam. I mean, I get that you were ashamed of me, I always knew that, but damn, pretending that I

never existed, that's whole new levels of asshole, Sam."

"*I thought you were dead!*" Sam shouted and the air seemed to go out of the room. Dean sure as hell couldn't get any into his lungs. After a minute Sam went on in a lower voice. "I met Carrie and Tuck a year ago. I hadn't heard from you in six months, no one had. I thought you and Dad were dead. I thought I really was an only child."

Dean looked anywhere in the room but at his brother's face. "Sorry."

Sam made a choking noise halfway between a sob and a laugh. Then he sighed, rubbed his face. "You got personnel files?"

Dean swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. And surveillance tape."

"Blonde or brunette?"

It was easier to grin than to apologize, and Dean liked his brother a lot better for giving him that out. "Red head. Cute thing, a bit neglected, though."

Sam laughed and shook his head. "Well I'm sure you fixed that." If his eyes still shone a bit bright, they both politely ignored it.

Their room had a VCR, fortunately. Dean plopped down to watch while Sam sorted through the files. "You really think one of these guys might be connected?" Sam asked dubiously, eyeing the photos of plumbers and cleaning ladies.

Dean shrugged. "Dunno, it's a long shot. But maybe…"

He trailed off, staring at the TV.

The time on the tape read 2: 47 am. In the front lobby of Sam's apartment building stood a woman. Tall, dark hair. For a moment Dean thought *No, couldn't be…* But then she turned slightly and looked up to read the names on the mailboxes, and he knew that profile, those sharp severe lips.

"Dean?" Sam asked. "You got something?"

"Naw, nothing," Dean responded automatically. On the TV, Mastema found the name she was looking for and moved off camera, heading into the building.

-o-

It took longer for the nightmares to wake Sam this time and he was slower to head into the bathroom. Less puking, more anguished sobs.

Dean lay awake as he had all night and remembered her laughing voice. *Sometimes I wonder, Dean. As many humans live in fear of me as demons.*

And Puck in the street, covered in blood.

If he'd been that wrong, then they were all well and truly fucked.

-o-

The building looked pretty much the same, except without the smoldering part. Sam, who'd practically lunged at the place last time, sat inside the car for five minutes without moving.

When they finally did get out, Connors met them in the yard. He read both of their faces, the exhaustion there, and got right to the point. "Anything we could salvage is at the station. Not much, but you're welcome to come down afterwards to pick it up."

Dean nodded for Sam, who had moved away up the walk towards the house. "Thank you."

Connors grunted and turned to watch Sam. When he moved out of earshot the detective added casually, "Stop impersonating officers."

Dean blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Stop impersonating officers." The look Connors gave him brokered no argument. "I get that he's your little brother and you want to know what happened. But you interfere with the investigation again and I'll arrest you."

Dean licked his lips and nodded. "Have you guys…"

Connors sighed and wiped his face. "Wish I had a better answer for you boys. We've gone through that house top to bottom. Nothing manmade started this fire. Far as we can tell, it was faulty wiring. As for the girl… well, there wasn't much to autopsy. But we couldn't find anything out of the ordinary." He met Dean's gaze, hard eyes momentarily softened. "Bad luck."

You have no idea. "Yeah," Dean agreed quietly, his eyes on his brother. "Can we go inside now?"

Connors turned and gestured to a younger man nearby. “Douglas will take you in, escort you guys around. Step where he tells you to and don’t step where he tells you not to.”

“Yessir.”

Fortunately Douglas turned out to be the quiet type. Patient, too. He stood with Dean in absolute silence, as Dean stood with Sam in absolute silence, and Sam stood alone in absolute silence until the shadows deepened.

-o-

The stuff at the police station fit inside one cardboard box. Dishes, mostly, a blanket, some kind of palm pilot thingy and a laptop. Must have been Jessica’s: it had some pretty goofy stickers on the top that Dean doubted were Sam’s.

Sam took the blanket and the laptop, signed for them both. Dean stood at his elbow and watched his brother’s face.

“Detective,” Sam said quietly. “Do you have a number for Jess’ parents? It was saved in my cell phone and I don’t have it anymore.”

-o-

Sam had cried several times that week. He cried again on the phone with Jess’ mom. Dean went for a walk that basically consisted of pacing around the parking lot. When he came back inside, Sam had curled up in bed, blankets pulled over him, shutting out the world.

-o-

The two-hit combo of his brother gasping awake and the bathroom door shutting had become something of an alarm clock for Dean. This time, though, he rolled out of bed and followed.

Sam sat on the floor hunched over the toilet, head bowed. He looked up when Dean entered, half resistant, eyes guarded. Not the boy he’d once been, but Jesus, who was counting anymore?

“I’m fine,” Sam choked, defensive and denying. Pushing away.

Dean plucked a couple of towels off the rack. “’Course you are. Sit on this, the floor is cold.” He tossed one towel at Sam’s legs.

“I’m f – ” Sam started again, but a heave interrupted him and he spat

up air and stomach acid, like his body had nothing else to give.

In the absence of light, Dean could move to his brother's side. Only when they became smudges in the dark could they ever see each other clearly. He sat down on the bathtub's edge and draped the second towel over Sam's rigid, arching back. Tense muscles rolled under his hands and Dean rubbed gently, patting as he wrapped the towel closer.

"I'm fine," Sam whispered brokenly into the toilet.

Dean closed hands around his little brother's shoulders, pulled Sam back against his legs. Sam went limply, head lolling to fall against Dean's knee. He wiped his mouth clumsily, rubbed it off on his pants.

Then he reached up, groping in the darkness to find Dean's shoulder. He gripped it, holding on.

Dean bent low and slid his arms the rest of the way around Sam's upper chest. Kissed the shaggy hair and told him in a voice like fine steel, "You're fine. I'm here. You're gonna be fine."

The last bit of fight went out of Sam's body. Dean felt it go and held on.

-o-

They slept the night on the bathroom floor, Dean propped against the wall and Sam propped against Dean.

Dean woke first but kept his eyes closed, letting Sam twitch awake and move away to keep a little bit of his dignity. When Sam had safely made it into the other room, Dean finally stretched and groaned loudly. "Awwww, man. Do we have any painkillers left in the kit?"

"Yeah… some Aleve." Sam met him at the door, a pair of pills already in hand along with a cup of water. He smiled crookedly. "Thanks."

"For what?" Dean plucked the pills up, downed them without water. "Best night of sleep I've had in years."

Sam laughed and would never know that it was the truth. He turned away into the bedroom and it was only then that Dean noticed the black suit laid out on Sam's bed.

Sam heard the silence and saw the look. "Service is at two."

Dean wondered how many times they could fall in and pull themselves back out. He looked at Sam's weary face, equal parts grief and stubborn resilience and thought, *As many as it takes*.

-o-

"This is my brother Dean," Sam announced before anyone can ask. At the door, in the claustrophobic foyer, to the priest and the sorority sisters and the blue-eyed woman who had to be Jessica's mother. Carol Moore, she introduced herself, holding Dean's hand in both her soft palms and looking directly through her grief into his eyes. Everyone else glanced at their threadbare clothes, frowns crinkling around the edges. Enough knew Sam to erase doubt, but the only thing keeping Dean from making a break for the exit was the note in his brother's voice as he made their introductions. "This is my brother Dean."

-o-

They left town that afternoon. Sam discreetly circulated at the wake that he would be away for a while, spending some time with family. Carol Moore murmured about the interview and law school, but Sam just shook his head. "I'm not thinking about that right now, Mrs. Moore," and she nodded with a gentle familiarity. Watching her, Dean felt a stab of something ugly like jealousy. She probably knew much more about Sam's life these days than he did.

Still, nothing could hold back that unaccountable surge of relief he felt when the Impala hit the highway speeding out of town with two souls aboard. She'd been tipped too long to the driver's side and only now, with a counterweight in the passenger's seat, did she move like she should.

The second they were away from city streets Sam asked Dean to pull over. On the side of the road, he took out the black suit they'd bought and doused it with lighter fluid. Burned it like there was something inside that needed exorcizing. Dean contributed his slacks, not a word about the money wasted.

When Sam came back to the car, he paused and stared at the passenger seat, then chuckled softly. "So you did get those."

A cell phone sat atop a worn but neatly folded Stanford sweater. Dean popped a stick of gum in his mouth and chewed. "Yeah. Figured you could use them more than me."

“Dean.” Sam regarded him with those too-serious eyes, that solemn gaze he’d developed at an almost-creepily young age. “They were gifts.”

“Yeah, and now they are again.” Dean shrugged nonchalantly. “I missed a few birthdays.”

Back in the car, they made it to Reno with the setting sun at their back, then split off from the freeway just before the spot where Dean could have pointed and said *I almost froze to death there when I was suicidal and Dad was in the hospital with a tube down his throat. Good times.*

Somewhere away down the freeway was the shack where he’d despaired of life and tried to find the alternative. Dean didn’t bring that up, either.

With college and Jess’ grave behind them, something unwound in Sam and he couldn’t seem to keep his eyes open. He fought it hard, fear showing at the edges, terror of whatever waited to claim him in dreams. Dean gripped the wheel hard, that same feeling of helplessness burrowing under his skin. This, he could not fight or protect his brother from. He could only hope that Sam would still be there on the other side of waking. And to watch it in the meantime, to see the helpless slide into sleep and the gasps of fear and pain back into awareness, had already cemented itself as one of the more painful things Dean had ever witnessed.

But he did. That much he could do. He could watch and wait, be there when Sam woke up. Be something he could put his back against.

They had practice with that, a whole lifetime’s worth.

-o-

Dean pulled over somewhere in central Nevada, a desolate trucker’s rest stop. Sam, who had fallen asleep and jerked awake twice on the drive, barely made it inside the room before crashing on the bed.

“Timmmberrr.” Dean poked his leg. “At least get your shoes off, dude.”

Sam said something muffled into the sheets, but scraped his tennis shoes off with the toes of his feet. Dean laid the lines of protection (*need more salt*), folded Sam’s comforter up around him like a taco (*gotta find him some more clothes, something warmer*), and slid his knife

under the pillow (*stay safe, can't be too sure*). He didn't remember his own face hitting the pillow's top.

He must have slept deeply because he had no sensation of time passing between going to sleep and when Sam's hands roughly shook him awake. "Dean," Sam hissed in the dark. "Dean, wake up."

Dean's fingers closed around the knife before his eyes even opened. "Sam," he groaned groggily. "Wha – what's wrong?" Sam let go of him and moved away in the dark. But Dean could still hear him, crouched close beside the bed. Dean rolled over onto his back. "Didja have a nightmare?"

Sam laughed, faint and a little desperate. "No. No. I just – "

He broke off and said nothing for a moment. Dean twisted to read the clock. "Sam, it's… 3 am, what the hell'd you wake me for…"

"When I left for college, I didn't leave you." The words chased each other out of Sam's mouth so fast they almost ran together. "I just wanted to say that."

Dean blinked. Wide awake, he had a hard time reading Sam these days. "What are you talking about?"

Sam sighed in a rush and stood. Dean could hear him start to pace around the foot of the beds. "At the funeral service today," Sam went on, and it sounded like both the beginning and end of a long story, "I sat there and all I could think about were all the things that I'd wanted to say to Jess but I never had. All those secrets that I should have told her… and it reminded me – " his voice choked, "it reminded me of last year, when I thought you were dead. When I thought you and Dad were gone and I was alone. I went to church." He laughed and sounded truly desperate this time. "Church, Dean."

Dean's chest felt tight. "I'm sorry, Sam, I didn't mean to sca – "

"I sat in church," Sam interrupted, "and I thought about how you might have died. How you were probably in some godforsaken swamp or a deserted house where no one would find you and I'd never know how it had happened. If you'd died in pain or alone or something. I thought about all the things that I wanted to tell you, how I wanted to say that – that it was never about you. When I left, I didn't go because of you, of anything you did or didn't do. I hated thinking that you might have died believing that, thinking that I hated you somehow. So, you know." Dean could barely make out the wave of his arm, but

he heard the impact as Sam hit his thigh. “I thought I should say it now. Just in case.”

Dean’s chest tightened further and he sat up sharply. “Don’t say that. Don’t you ever goddamned say ‘just in case’ to me. I’m not going anywhere, Sam, and neither are you.”

“But you did,” Sam said plaintively and the hair on the back of Dean’s neck stood up. He sounded so young. “You did. You went away.”

Trucks passed on the highway, the soundtrack of their lives. Dean sucked in a breath and spoke gruffly. “Yeah, I did. I’m sorry. That – that wasn’t about you, either.” He waited, tense, wondering if Sam would ask a follow-up question and how he would answer.

Sam sighed in the darkness. “I wanted to track you down and kill you myself when I got that Christmas package and all the postcards.”

Dean’s focus lay so intently on *not* freaking out that for a moment he didn’t catch it. “The postcards?”

“Yeah, all those postcards you sent me this year.” He choked a faint laugh, a little less desperate. “Not that I exceptionally wanted to hear about werewolves in Green Bay, but it was nice to know you weren’t dead.”

Dean remembered postcards. He remembered a hundred postcards, purchased (seemingly) at random. Their owner had been all too happy to let him scribble hunting notes on them and come to think of it, all that money Dean had forked over for sweets never produced any candy bars that he could recall. But it would have made a nice supply for postage stamps. *Puck*, Dean thought, *oh, Puck, wherever you are, please, God, be okay*. “I’m sorry,” he said aloud, shivering a bit. “I didn’t mean to leave you, Sam.” He swallowed, licked his lips, and then added carefully, “Anymore than you meant to leave me.”

There was a long pause and then Sam came back and sat on his bed with a creak. “I wanted to be happy,” he murmured in that same soft, boyish voice. “I couldn’t be what Dad wanted, I didn’t *like* hunting. It wasn’t about you, or him, even. I just – I wanted to be happy.”

God, how many times can we go under and pull each other out? “Were you?” Dean asked and wasn’t sure what he wanted the answer to be.

Sam lay back in bed. “Sometimes,” he whispered to the night. “Sometimes.”

He went back to sleep almost instantly. Dean did not and after about half an hour of listening to his brother's steady, undisturbed breathing, he got up.

The air outside bit into him with its cold. Dean huddled beneath his jacket and breathed on his hands. The world spun around him and he was a broken compass, helpless and useless.

Then he looked out across the parking lot and saw the motorcycle.

It could have been one of millions, but there was that goddamned prickle along his back.

Sam was safe behind his salt lines and Dean had the Glock on his back. He didn't draw it, but slid a hand up to touch its cool surface as he moved along the row of motel doors. One stood barely ajar and a little sliver of light fell out. Dean pushed it open and stepped inside.

It took half a second for his eyes to adjust and then he said "Puck" like a blessing.

Puck stood up from his cross-legged seat on foot of the bed. Whole and unhurt, more beautiful in his tiny ugliness than any Greek statue. He came straight across to Dean, tears shining in his small black eyes and Dean picked him straight up and hid his face against a sharp birdlike collarbone. "Puck," he whispered, rocking his diminutive friend so that feet bumped against his knees. Skinny arms slid around his neck and held on with surprising strength.

Dean drew back, hooked a chin over Puck's shoulder and saw Mastema sitting in the bed. Watching them with cold eyes.

"Very touching," she said and took a swig from the bottle balanced on her thigh.

Dean tensed and so did Puck's arms. "It wasn't her," Puck said into his ear, fast and breathless. "She didn't do it."

Mastema laughed softly and the sound froze Dean's skin. "Actually, I did. If we're talking about the girl, yes, I killed her."

Puck twisted in Dean's arms and pulled in breath to speak. But nothing came out and in the absence Mastema laughed again. Something dark moved underneath the sound, something that spiked through Dean's veins and brought every muscle on edge. He set Puck down slowly, trying to angle him to the side. But the Nagumwasuck

slithered away out of reach, backing up to stand between Dean and the bed. His jaw was set, stubborn.

Mastema groaned elaborately. “Shut the door, Dean. It’s cold outside. Where’s Sam?”

“Safe.” Dean looked to Puck, not her. Puck stared back, rock steady, and nodded. Dean shut the door, but put his back to it and did not come further into the room.

Mastema made an inelegant noise and drank again from the bottle. “Safe. Heh, sure. With a demon gunning for him.” Her lips curled. “No wonder I had to save your miserable asses, you people clearly are too stupid to breathe, on top of being a liability to everyone around you.”

Dean’s head snapped away from Puck. “You fucking bitch. Was it you? All this time, was it some kind of game, pretending to help me, pretending to be human and to love that poor dumb fuck in Arizona – ”

That was as far as he got before Mastema came up off the bed, her face twisted. Dean’s fists rose and Puck strangled a warning. But it was Mastema who Puck dove for, Mastema who was suddenly falling, sheet-white, to the floor.

Dean stood with his hands clench, brain struggling to catch up with what he saw. Puck fixed him with a fierce glare. “Get some towels from the bathroom. *Now*.”

The last word came out cast in iron. Several wet towels hung over the sink already stained bright red. Only one had dried and Dean brought it out quickly. Puck snatched the cloth from his hands, applied pressure to the right places. “Stupid,” he hissed softly from between his teeth as he wrapped Mastema’s arm. “Stupid stupid bitch.”

“I would like,” Mastema’s voice said faintly, “to know who taught you how to swear. I know it wasn’t me.”

Puck laughed, a little hysterically, and threw Dean a quick look. Dean swallowed hard and knelt on her other side. “I think you’ve got me to blame for that. And the pot smoking.”

One of Mastema’s green eyes slitted open. “You gave him *drugs*?”

Puck tied off the towel sharply and the green eye rolled back to show white. She shuddered and then went limp. Dean raised wide eyes to

Puck, who looked grim but whispered, “Help me get her on the bed.”

That took a little effort and by the time they did Mastema had woken up again and regarded them both with cold, disinterested eyes. But Dean recognized it now, just like he recognized how the reddening towel lay wrong over the stump where her left hand should be.

“It’ll grow back,” Mastema said shortly. “Gimme the bottle.”

“Gone,” Dean answered. So was Puck, and from the bathroom there echoed the distinct sound of liquid being poured down a toilet. Mastema groaned and thumped her skull against the headboard.

“Fuck! Did I ask for a fucking *nursemaid*?” she snarled, but without any real venom. Her eyes when she opened them again shown white with desperation, a wild animal cornered.

Dean met her gaze and held it, looked nowhere else. “What happened?”

That calmed her a bit. She licked her lips and scooted back a bit on the bed, sitting up with a wince. “I was slow. I was weak. I killed the girl.” She didn’t look at him. Didn’t look at anything. Dean waited. “I came across its trail, tracked it to Stanford. It’d been making itself comfortable at your brother’s place for a while.”

Dean’s back went rigid. “It was there *all the time*? While we were *there*?”

She nodded grimly. “Not doing anything overt. Just sliding along the edges, biding its time. Probably whispering in Sam’s ear.” Two pairs of green eyes looked straight into each other. “It’s a demon. And it wants Sam.”

He started shaking, tremors spearing outward from the column of his back. “Why?”

“It’s old, damned old. Things like that, they don’t waste time with bush league shit like possessing teenagers or setting churches on fire. They’re more elegant.” Her voice had gone soft, faraway, and her head dropped back to rest against the wall. “To them, human beings are just toys on the playground. God’s toys. And they want to play. If one is shinier than the others, damn if they don’t move Hell and Earth to try and take it for themselves. Your brother’s shiny, Dean. How, I don’t know. But this demon, it wants to play with him. Twist him up into something dark, a toy to call its own.”

“So it was gonna take him? It was waiting there when – when I left?”

“Actually, sweetheart,” and a little of her customary sardonic edge had returned, “I think it was waiting for you.”

Dean blinked. “But you said…”

“That it wants Sam, yes. But this isn’t the kind of thing that swoops down and carries people away into the night. It wants its toys right where they are, smack dab in the middle of God’s playground where He can see what it’s done to them. So instead, it brings the night to them and that’s quite an elegant trick, one that I happen to know something about.” Her lips curled into that familiar unpleasant smile. “Since we’re baring our souls here, we might as well be forthright and honest and say that you have at one point or another been Sam’s brother, his father, his mother, his guardian, and his friend. Now do you really think that Sam’s going to do a damn thing the demon wants while you’ve got his back?”

Puck had come back into the room and stood by the bathroom door, pale and silent. He’d been present at the absolute end of Dean, the only thing that pulled him back. “Maybe,” Dean whispered.

Mastema shifted and sighed with another wince. “Oh shut up. Give yourself some credit, Dean, you’re the Energizer fucking Bunny. You get hit and just keep going and going, it’s what you do. I mean, Godalmighty, did it never once occur to you that *anyone* else, Sam, your father, fucking *me*, would have put a bullet in their own head long ago?”

There was truth to that, but too much for him to get a grip on at once. “So I’m standing between it and Sam. If I hadn’t gone to get him… this wouldn’t have happened?”

“Nope.” Her smile widened, became sickly sweet. “And if Sam had never been born, he wouldn’t have met her and she wouldn’t have been there. And if I’d been three seconds faster I coulda saved her and not lost a fucking hand.” Her smile wavered and shattered.

Puck made a faint noise, came a little closer. “It’ll grow back,” he murmured. “It’ll take a while, but it’ll grow back.”

Mastema made a noise like strangled laughter. Her eyes flickered shut for a moment, then reopened and found Dean’s.

“What happened?”

“I was slow,” she continued evenly. “It felt me coming, grabbed the girl. Possessed her. That was probably its plan from the beginning: use her body to kill you, fuck Sam up good and proper.” She chuckled mirthlessly and shook her head with the faintest, chilling touch of admiration. “It didn’t really want to kill her… not its usual MO, but I don’t think it was being picky. I couldn’t move on it. Not without killing her. We were there all goddamned weekend, the three of us, right up until I heard the car engine pull up outside.”

Dean shivered, knowing but needing to hear. “And then?”

“I moved on it. Killed the girl.”

Their eyes stayed on each other, to the bitter end. “Only way I could walk out without saying I’d fucked it *completely* to Hell,” she amended softly.

Dean thought of Sam, asleep in his bed two doors down. He looked straight into her eyes and said, “Thank you.”

Something changed in her face, went slack, disbelieving. “You’ve saved my brother’s life twice over,” Dean explained gently. “Makes you golden in my book.”

She stared, incredulous, then made an odd noise in her throat and leaned back to close her eyes. Dean finally looked away, to Puck. “Will she be okay?”

“Yeah. Eventually.” He met Dean’s gaze and smiled a little, worn out. “Sam’s having a nightmare. It’s just started, but he’ll wake up soon.”

Dean’s stomach tightened. He looked back at Mastema and addressed them both. “Where will you go?”

Mastema’s thin lips curved but her eyes did not open. “I understand there’s a lovely shack a few hundred miles north of here perfect for invalids.”

Dean gaped at her, then at Puck. The latter blushed and ducked his head, and despite it all, despite everything, Dean had to laugh just a little, rubbing his face with both hands. When he took his fingers away Mastema’s attention had returned in the form of a solemn, steady gaze.

“Don’t go looking for it, Dean,” she said without preamble. “Don’t look for your father neither. He knows what it is and he’s got the good

goddamned sense to send you to ground; he's not at Blackwater Ridge, I promise you that much. I can remember a time when you infants hit each other over the head with clubs and in my whole existence nothing has come closer to killing me than this thing almost did. So don't look. Let Sam think you are, lie to him if you have to. But it ain't worth your life, or his."

In the faint light from the table lamp her face held not one ounce of beauty. Drawn and white, thin lips and hard eyes. Dean regarded her for a long moment, then leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead, her cheek, and her mouth.

He did not say goodbye. They hadn't before, why should they now?

-o-

The door shut behind him and cold air assaulted his body. Stars had come out and Dean vaguely remembered sitting on the curb of some other motel, warmer days and warmer hearts, letting Sam point out the constellations to him. *That one's Gemini, the twins. They're always together, right there, forever.*

The stars swirled above him, never staying still long enough. Two doors down Sam was probably screaming, fighting for his life with dreams that might claim him. *You're the only thing between It and Sam*, and the world spun, leaving him small and helpless, clutching to dust that crumpled in his hands. He wasn't strong enough, he wasn't brave enough, Jesus, he'd failed so many times before…

Warmth replaced the cold like someone had turned November off. It wrapped around him, rubbed his hands, tapped his cheeks like a friend. The world still spun, but at its center he was still. He was himself. Dean. The Energizer fucking Bunny, who could go on and on.

His eyes had closed of their own volition. Without opening them, Dean commented softly, "You've gotten really damn good at that."

From behind him came a throaty chuckle. "Between the two of you, I've had practice."

Dean turned and recognition popped up like a ticket. He was not the only one who could go on forever.

Puck looked up at him in bluish light of moon and stars. So small, so frail looking. But he'd survived, hadn't he? Left behind, left to a world that had outgrown him and he'd survived. *Seen the absolute end of me*

and still here. Seen the blood and bones and almost starved, but the upturned face held no shadows; it might as well have belonged to a newborn. Darkness touched them all… Dean, Sam, the woman on the bed who was not a woman. But not *him*. Never him.

“Take care of Sam,” Puck instructed in a low voice. “Take care of yourself.”

Dean laughed shakily, reached out to run a finger down over Puck’s eyebrow and cheek, marveling at the delicate bones. “Yeah. I’ll try. You take care of her. And you…. and you.” Then, because the dark of night was long and he was leaving, “I think you could go to the end of the world and make a beginning there from dust.”

A smile touched Puck’s face, so faint. “I have.”

They stood in silence, just a pair of silhouettes under the stars. Then one moved away back towards the light. The other stood longer in the darkness before it, too, left the night behind.

And that was the end of the 1313th day.

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Epilogue

“You think maybe it means something?” Sam asked, wincing as the rough road jostled another set of bruises courtesy of a poltergeist. “1300 days? Maybe the number is, like… significant somehow.”

They sped through the night on an Arizona back road. It was the first time Dean had been back in the state since Merrill. He had said nothing to Sam, because anything that needed saying, they already knew.

And the rest he could bear alone.

“Dunno,” he responded with a shrug. “Maybe. Maybe you’re just a paranoid freak.”

Chapter 9: The 1300 Days Interlude: Burying Dean

Chapter Summary

Sam's POV.

Burying Dean

“At the funeral service today,” Sam went on, and it sounded like both the beginning and end of a long story, “I sat there and all I could think about were all the things that I’d wanted to say to Jess but I never had. All those secrets that I should have told her… and it reminded me – ” his voice choked, “it reminded me of last year, when I thought you were dead. When I thought you and Dad were gone and I was alone. I went to church.” He laughed and sounded truly desperate this time. “Church, Dean.”

Dean’s chest felt tight. “I’m sorry, Sam, I didn’t mean to sca – ”

“I sat in church,” Sam interrupted, “and I thought about how you might have died. How you were probably in some godforsaken swamp or a deserted house where no one would find you and I’d never know how it had happened.”

-- from The 1300 Days, chapter 8, “The 1313th Day: A Beginning at the End”

It took Sam a year and a half to bury Dean.

The last time Dean called had been on some scratchy pay phone at truck stop in North Carolina. He’d joked about muggers and the sunny California weather. Sam heard the echoes underneath, the hollow places that Dean propped up with little slivers of his own bones, stretching himself to cover up the gaps and holes in their lives. Sam talked a lot of shit about college and a future, but a big part of the reason he left home was so that he didn’t have to see it anymore, didn’t have to bear witness to the infinite number of ways that Dean tore chunks out of his soul to stop up the leaky dam that was their family.

He was not strong enough to bear the knowledge that most of those holes in Dean? Were torn out for *him*.

Stanford seemed huge when he arrived. Vast, monstrous buildings that curved overhead and threatened to topple on top of him. Sam had gravitated to the first open place he could find, the grassy meadow to the north of campus. It seemed a popular spot: other kids lay out under the open sky on blankets and sleeping bags. He sat down by himself, separated, and stared out over the campus.

If he called right now, it would take Dean… two days to get here. He would, too. He'd be wounded, suspicious that Sam might leave again, but he'd come. Sam looked out over the red tile rooftops and thought *Oh my* God *what am I doing, this is insane, Dean come and get me, I'm sorry I take it back, who the* fuck *am I kidding I can't do this I can't I'm alone I'm* alone.

But then he'd thought of how his father's face would look when he came in the door. Dean would keep his distance, would probably be thankful enough to have him back, but John would get right on him with a lecture. Or worse, wouldn't let him in the front door. *If you leave, don't come back*. He imagined standing outside some nebulous house (because they'd had so many and they'd had none). His father on the threshold barring entry, and Dean standing between them. Endlessly, perpetually balanced between the two of them, and Sam knew if he went back, Dean would have to choose.

And that was another thing that Sam just did not have the strength to face. Because of all things in the world, he did not doubt the simple stone wall of Dean's love.

But he doubted who Dean loved more.

Still, he almost called three times in that first week, when his feet ached from walking everywhere and the California sales tax made his jaw drop. But then he'd met Dylan, an Aeronautics Engineering major, who spoke with a 'Bama drawl and lived with his door open to anyone and everyone as long they were cool with his transsexual Filipino girlfriend Harvey. At first Sam thought Dylan was insane to trust so easily, to make himself that vulnerable. But then he remembered that this was the New World, where shadows across your door meant the hallway light had burned out and strange travelers could be welcomed inside to dinner without fearing that they might eat their host. Sam slept on their rollout couch for the summer months until school started and he could move in to the dorms.

So he didn't call and after that first week Dad and Dean had undoubtedly moved on from the hotel where Sam had left them. So he

threw out the hotel stationary and got a cell phone. He didn't even have sheets yet, just slept on the plastic mattress, but he bought a cell phone first and mailed the number to Pastor Jim, who could get it to Dean faster than any mailbox.

The first time Dean called, Sam sat down in the grass beside his bag and missed Writing 101, Chinese Civilizations, a quiz on the human digestive system, and a date with some girl. It didn't matter. He sat there for an hour, maybe more, listening to Dean forgive him without ever speaking those words.

At the end Dean said, "You amaze me" and Sam had been speechless that his brother could actually say something like that. But Dean, he discovered, could communicate so much better over long distances.

For the first time, Sam thought that maybe, maybe Stanford hadn't been a huge mistake, and he could do this after all.

-o-

It took Sam six months to start worrying.

That first Christmas at Stanford he'd been buoyant, full of love for the world that came partly from this *fantastic* champagne that someone at the party had handed him, and partly from the blithe abandon of a life unbounded by lines drawn in salt or scars. And okay, there'd been that incident with the selkie down in the Bay back in August, but he'd handled it quick and certainly wasn't looking for any more trouble. He was Sam the College Student, the future of America, and he giggled into his champagne.

Dean hadn't dropped by for the holidays like Sam had hoped, but that was okay, he'd promised to visit during Spring Break. Sam sent him a mix CD and player… it occurred to him that Dean might not check the Lawrence mailbox, but Sam would remind him when he called next.

Except he didn't call.

-o-

It took Sam a whole year to even allow himself to wonder if Dean was dead.

At the year mark it all came crashing down on Sam and he lay in bed choking, struggling to breathe through his terror. This was the deadline he'd given himself and he punched in Pastor Jim's number

with unsteady fingers. Dean and Dad would hate it, they were both so private, even with Jim. The training of an isolated life, protecting themselves from unwanted questions.

Sam hated it for an entirely different reason… calling someone to ask after his own family, to beg for scraps, to admit that yes, he'd left them and no, they hadn't called in a while and please, are they okay?

Jim had been startled, but recovered well. "Stanford, Sam? That's amazing," he said with real warmth. And yes, he had seen Dean just two months ago, he and John had passed through on their way to New York. They'd been down in the Southwest somewhere for quite a while and Dean, he added carefully, looked a little the worse for wear. They'd been through something rough. No, they didn't say what. Did Sam want to send them a message?

Sam thanked him and hung up. He sat in the dark until morning.

The next day he went out and bought a cell phone, wrapped and addressed it to the Lawrence box. It took him six hours to write the card: every time his pen touched paper it wanted to write hysterical sentences like *What happened are you okay did something hurt you why haven't you called what did I do wrong I'm sorry whatever I did I was scared I hate you why would you let me be so scared I was* alone.

Instead he wrote something halfway flippant and mailed it off.

Dean didn't call.

-o-

It took another six months for Sam to accept that Dean was dead.

The general rule of thumb in the hunting community placed time of death at the six-month mark without any contact. Sam waited exactly that long, then swallowed what little bit remained of his pride and called Jim a second time in April. This time the pastor's voice rang with concern and sympathy that burrowed under Sam's skin and burned like acid. Jim put the word out to everyone, but nothing came back in. No one had seen or heard from the older Winchesters in seven, eight, ten months.

And then they had all heard from John, who was looking for Dean. And Sam knew his older brother was dead, because there was only ever room enough in Dean's heart for two people.

If their father thought there was any chance of finding Dean, he would have contacted Sam himself. He didn't ask for John's number.

There had only ever really been room in Sam's heart for one.

His sometimes-girlfriend of the moment, Carley, kept asking questions until she didn't anymore. Sam let her go, didn't try to hang on. If he was going to be alone, he should do it properly. The world shrank around him to the smallest mechanics of his day. Breakfast, class, homework, papers, bed.

Then June rolled around and school ended like the edge of a plank and he was falling, falling. Dean was dead, his brother, his family, he was *gone* and Sam drifted through days like seconds, only taking notice when June became July. July was Dean's birthday… *a summer child* he'd always called himself with a grin. Sam thought about how he would never see that smile again and closed his eyes against the summer sun.

In July Sam wandered aimlessly, untethered. He went up and down the streets of Palo Alto, drifted over to San Fran. He found a shop there that advertised mystical objects in gaudy signs on the outside. Inside was another story, where the clerk looked at him with sharp eyes and pulled out a special stock from behind the counter.

He bought a pendant that the young man told him was meant for travelers. Sam had no more illusions than he had hope, but some kind of morbid determination drove him to wrap it up and mail it after the others, a line cast into the dark that would never be returned.

He wound his way back to Stanford and stared with dull eyes at the buildings there. They had so terrified him at first. Now there was nothing, no fear or fascination. This had never been the gold ring of his life, whatever Dean had believed. He hadn't left home with the intention of never returning. He just… he had wanted to *know*. Years of watching bright windows flash past as they drove through, always just driving through, had left him yearning to know more, to see more. Plenty of things in this bright cherry world he'd discovered set his teeth on edge… the looming grind of 9 to 5, a vast array of self-absorbed college twits with no concept of their own mortality, that goddamned sales tax.

He might have gone home. When all this, *this* being the buildings around him, was over, he might have gone home where it was dark and dangerous but clear. Truthful. The world as it was, full of

shadows.

Except his home had died.

-o-

Somehow he wound up in a church. That part is a little hazy… he remembered getting a bottle of something from somewhere.

The next thing he remembered was sitting in a pew of the University Student Ministry and sobbing so hard it felt like his vertebrae were coming apart. Dean was more than dead, he was *gone*, where no one can find him, probably lying in a hole somewhere. Sam tried to imagine his broken body, whether he died slowly, in pain, alone. If something had made him bleed or scream and Sam was sure that he would never breathe again.

Someone was sitting next to him. A girl, hovering on the edge of his periphery. Sam had no idea how she got there or where she came from and he'd be spitting out Latin if he wasn't already in a church. She didn't speak, didn't touch him.

When he got up to leave she followed him outside and stood with morning sun on her blonde hair. "Is there someone I can call?" she asked softly. Serious, calm, clear eyed.

"No," Sam answered thickly, blinking in the light. He felt stretched, a metal wire drawn out beyond endurance or repair. "No, there's no one. My brother died."

She took him home, made him breakfast. Her name is Jessica, she said at some point, and he fell asleep on her couch, slept forever. When he woke up she made him dinner.

-o-

Jessica – *Jess* – worked in the student mental health center. She was trained and she was *good*, asked just enough questions to open herself up, but not too much to shut him down. When he answered she listened and when he didn't she did not seem disappointed.

He thought she was insane, too, letting a strange man into her house and even leaving him there alone for long periods of time while she went to her summer job. When he asked her about it, she stood in the kitchen with her hands on her hips and cocked her head sideways at him. "Are you going to hurt me?"

Sam blinked. “No.”

She studied him, then smiled faintly. Afterwards Sam will wonder if he remembers it right. He could plead mental distress, having just lost his brother and his world. But really, it was just that easy. She smiled and he fell in love. “Guess what?” she announced, tossing her keys on the table. “I believe you.”

She was a beach bum and perpetually wore a bathing suit underneath her work clothes. After a week of sleeping on her couch and watching TV Sam allowed himself to be dragged out into the sun, where his pale shoulders burned and Jess’ eyes lit up at the sight of waves. A big group of her friends met them there and Sam recognized enough of them from school not to feel out of place. Jess’ friend Carrie cooed over him, to the amused patience of her boyfriend Tuck. “Tall drink of water!” she said with waggling eyebrows at Jess, and Sam blushed under his sunburn. Which in turn made her coo more, of course.

He really hadn’t socialized much in his first two years at Stanford, always felt like something of an imposter. But it was all gone now, everything he’d once been had died, and his skin felt raw from more than just the sun.

They migrated inland to a club, where Jess stood on the edges with shy eyes and clenched limbs. Carrie had nudged and nudged until Sam got up out of his own corner and went over to her. Her eyes got wider and she waved a hand frantically. “Oh no. I don’t dance.”

Sam had looked down at her and thought about her eyes when she saw the ocean. “Neither do I. Come on.”

By the end she was laughing and people were taking pictures. “Oh my god!” she wailed, holding onto his arm. Sam couldn’t bring himself to care about the pain of her fingers on his sensitive skin. “We’re a freak show! We’re an uncoordinated freak show!”

Later she sat him down on the floor of her kitchen and rubbed lotion into his shoulders. Sam bowed his head and gritted his teeth, because for crying out loud, he’d only known her two weeks. Was it supposed to be like this? Was this how it happened?

Then she’d leaned down over him and her long blonde hair had trailed across his skin. She murmured in his ear, hot breath so close. “Well?”

He twisted around, got off the floor and picked her up in one motion. Her eyes went wide as she drifted upward easily. “Wow.”

Sam paused, suddenly feeling foolish, standing in her kitchen with her toes bumping against his knees. “Sorry…”

She smiled, slow and wide in a way that shot straight down to his groin. She lifted her legs and wrapped him around his waist, lowered her head. “Tall drink of water, my ass,” she murmured into his mouth. “Tall drink of *water tower* more like it.”

-o-

It took a month for him to bury Dean, and every bit of the life he’d once had.

Of course there wasn’t much to bury. The cell phone he’d bought when he’d first got here, which effectively cut himself off from anyone in the hunting world. A photo, one of the only that he had of Dean. He’d snapped it one night shortly after getting his acceptance letter to Stanford, when he’d first thought of leaving. They’d never needed photos before that, because they’d never been apart. In the picture, Dean sat behind the Impala’s wheel, head turned to the passenger seat, eyebrows raised in question, the straw of a drink held loose between his lips.

There had never been any other way that Sam wanted to remember his brother. Just like that, traveling down some back road, grousing about his upholstery when Sam dropped a French fry, thinking that they would drive on forever.

There was no other way that Sam could bear to remember him. Not dead. Just driving on forever, a phone call away.

He took the picture and the cell phone out and buried them at night on that rolling hill where he’d spent his first night. Buried what tiny little pieces his had left of his brother in an unmarked grave and sat beside it for hours until the eastern sky turned pink. Then he went to his new home and climbed into Jess’ bed and put his arms around her.

-o-

“What about you, Sam?” Carrie asked, rubbing a bit of suntan lotion on her arms. “You got any siblings?”

Jess sat at his back. Sam answered quietly, “No, it’s just me.”

-o-

It took him a year and a half to bury Dean.

It took Dean five months to come back to life.

Sam had moved in with Jess, which hadn't taken much work. She stood in the living room with her hands on her hips, looking over the two boxes and loaded backpack that summarized his physical existence. Sam's stomach had twisted but she'd only smiled and taken his backpack from him. It still dazed him sometimes how easily they drifted together and he gave up wondering if this was how it was Supposed to Be and just went with what he was given.

For Christmas he flew back East to meet her family in Massachusetts. His father was ex-military and liked Sam's posture; his mother had the same deliberate vulnerability as her daughter, arms opened to the world and willing to risk the bad for the good. Sam struggled valiantly to help her cook while Jess sat in at the kitchen table giggling into her wine over the apron Mrs. Moore had pinned to his waist. It was a surreal experience, standing there beside the sink with this grey-haired, plump lady who inquired about his interests, his plans.

Sam sat at the overflowing table and realized that he was sitting on the inside of a lit window. That this was what had been waiting there, hidden from his curious eyes. And this was his. His life, if he wanted it. He looked across the table and found Jess watching him. She smiled slow and faint and his heart felt like it might burst.

When he got back from the holiday break there was a package waiting for him. The lady behind the counter looked over the top of her spectacles at him. "We thought it was a bomb."

Sam stared at the writing. *To: Sam Merry Xmas From Dean.*

The date of publication in the book's liner said November 2004. The postage stamp read 12/24/04. Three weeks ago.

Sam drove around for hours, sobbing and screaming in turns. Relief and rage and pure dumb agony poured out of him in waves until there was nothing left and he fell asleep in the car, curled up in the driver's seat with the book held loosely in his lap.

The package had come from Lawrence. Sam wrote a letter back and tried not to write *too late too late, I buried you.*

After he mailed it Sam sat shivering in the cold and wondered if he had to choose between his lives which one he would pick.

-o-

Dean didn't call. Didn't write.

Sam knew he was a complete bastard the next few weeks and Jess almost kicked him out. That finally penetrated the haze of wandering anger that surrounded him and he sat on her front porch and explained carefully about his magic alive-again brother. She asked just enough questions, not too many, not too few, and took him back inside.

Sam found his choice made for him. So he made his plans and laid his future out. Stopped looking for letters in the mail.

-o-

It took exactly 1300 days for Dean to arrive in Stanford.

When he stood in Jess' living room, all cocky grin and closed-off eyes, Sam tried not to say *too late too late, why didn't you come sooner? I would have gone back. But I buried you, and I can't do it again.* But there'd been just as big a part of him that wanted to sing in triumph, because hell, Dean *had* gone driving on forever after all.

And afterwards, after the fire and Jess, it was Dean's turn to take Sam home, give him food. Dean didn't have Jess' skill at it: he was awkward and uncertain and afraid and there were such huge, huge holes in him that Dean stretched himself to cover and to hide. Sam didn't ask, didn't know how many questions would be too many; Dean was there, present, alive, and Sam needed him, even broken and angry and afraid. Because Jess was dead and gone and he'd lost his whole life again.

Sam wondered whether all the days of his existence would be like this, passing through one grief after another in an endless circle that always came back to where it began, with him losing everything he called home.

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